

# ANTARCTIC TOURISM, A CHILLING DILEMMA WITH NO SOLUTION IN SIGHT



The cold, silence, animals and plant life make Antarctica a unique landscape, as hard as it seems to imagine. But this place, which most people know through images, stories, movies and documentaries, is quickly becoming a destination for thousands of tourists. Antarctic tourism, however, could have irreversible consequences.

The uniqueness and purity of the icy continent and its surrounding islands are an attraction for many visitors, and January is the ideal month for traveling since the cold is manageable. There is virtually no snow preventing from walking or watching the animals and the beauty of the place.

King George Island, where research stations belonging to Argentina, Brazil, China, Chile, Russia and Uruguay are located, is the place chosen by Antarctic tourism companies to bring their customers to a one-of-a-kind experience, but **the exponential increase in tourism and its future repercussions are something that those under the Antarctic Treaty are seriously concerned about**; in particular, that the environmental impact may be irreversible.

## A Lost Argument

Since 1991, the International Association of Antarctica Tour Operators (IAATO) seeks to promote the practice of safe and environmentally responsible private-sector travel, although now it must adapt to a new reality.

Some countries have already taken measures in this regard, such as Uruguay and Peru, which are working together with the goal of analyzing how Antarctic tourism is developing on the Fildes Peninsula, one of the most visited locations on the island.

Mariana Ríos, a member of the National System of Protected Natural Areas of Uruguay (SNAP), and Juan Carlos Heaton, of the National Service of Natural Protected Areas of Peru (SERNANP), traveled across the island to talk with the members of each station and tourists. Ríos is concerned about the increase of visitors, both those who seek adventures and those who visit the stations, and she insists that “management of this type of tourism is urgent” to ensure the future of the peninsula and the island.

When one walks along the paths of King George, which extends across several kilometers and serves as a meeting point for both the stations and the dazzling landscapes, it is almost inevitable to cross paths with curious groups.

“It really is a seasonal activity,” says Heaton about Antarctic tourism at this time of the year, “ and the particular concern we have is that some trend or massification could happen.”

## The Changing Scenery

In some of the bays, it is already more common to see huge tourist cruises than the famous whales; although hopefully, at some point, they can be spotted on the icy waters. However, the sound of the ships and the powerful alarms can be heard constantly, breaking the silence and calm of the waters.

Protected areas, such as Ardley Island, where thousands of different species of penguins live, are also affected by the impact of tourism; and while the island has many reserved areas, there is already a beach exclusively for tourists to interact with these exotic animals.

## **Hard Work**

Experts from Uruguay and Peru spend days on the island taking long walks to know the situation first hand. "Everyone is worried about the growing tourism. They think it can have cumulative impacts and everyone agrees that current regulations are not enough to handle it," says Ríos.

Today, countries are facing the challenge of establishing clear standards and regulations. Even tour operators need the frozen continent to remain as a paradise, so they are in favor of some restrictions.

Ríos says that "They are the most worried. The destination they're selling is natural, so they want the tourist to take a picture of an impressive place where nature overwhelms you and wildlife comes to you."

Among these experts is Christina Braun, a German scientist working on the island since 2003. She studies the behavior of birds, seals and the impact of human activities on the environment.

"I think that one day it may be crucial for many people to know Antarctica, once the treaty end (which is open to review in 2048) we'll need ambassadors. That is also the idea or case for tourism," she says.

## **Antarctica Under Greenpeace's Radar**

Antarctica's nature is at risk, but not just because of the possible impact of increased tourism, but due to global warming and pollution. Only last week, the scientists in Antarctica announced a new record temperature of 20.75 degrees Celsius (69.35 Fahrenheit), breaking the barrier of 20 degrees for the first time on the continent. Knowing the increasing temperatures and the related dangers all too well, Greenpeace visited the area in early January with its Esperanza and Arctic Sunrise vessels.

"This expedition in Antarctica focuses on investigating the state of the Antarctic Ocean, including the impact of climate change, plastic pollution and industrial fishing on wildlife in this area, such as penguins and whales," says Frida Bengtsson, leader of the organization's 'Protect the Antarctic' campaign.

Greenpeace believes that Antarctic tourism must exist in order to see this destination's true value, but it has to be "well regulated", "highly restricted and responsible" to have "the least possible impact".

The future of this island is uncertain. **Tourism continues to move forward, with more visitors traveling during the Southern summer**, but there's still no solution at hand. Meanwhile, global warming continues and its effects can already be seen in the Collins Glacier, with cracks forming on its surface as the heat melts the ice.

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