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Antarctica as Top Tourist Destination: Testing the Resilience of the Antarctic Treaty System

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Abstract

In 1992, shortly after the adoption of the Madrid Protocol in 1991, France and four other Consultative Parties to the Antarctic Treaty tabled a proposal for a separate annex to the Protocol on the ‘Regulation Concerning Tourism and Non-Governmental Activities’. Discussions during an informal tourism meeting, organised prior to the XVIIth ATCM (Venice, 1992), and the formal discussions at that ATCM made clear that no consensus could be reached on the need for such a separate annex. An important argument against such a separate tourism annex was that the Protocol already applies to all human activities, including tourist activities. More than 25 years later, the number of tourists visiting Antarctica has increased from 6,495 in the 1991-92 season to more than 56,000 tourists in the 2018-19 season and the estimates for 2019-20 exceed 78,000 tourists (doc. ATCM 42/IP140 (IAATO)). In this time period, also the diversity of tourist activities in Antarctica has substantially increased. The ATCM has discussed tourism developments and related concerns each year, but when it comes to additional legally binding instruments, the ATCM has adopted only two Measures (in 2004 and 2009) that both have not yet entered into force.

These developments raise interesting questions regarding the resilience of the Antarctic Treaty System. In this context, resilience is understood as ‘robustness’ of a system due to the ability to adapt to change and to address related challenges to safeguard the fundamental aims and protected values of the system. This contribution studies the resilience of the Antarctic Treaty System, taking Antarctic tourism management as a case study. Questions that receive attention include:

- What are the main developments in Antarctic tourism since the adoption of the Madrid Protocol and what have been/are the main challenges from the perspective of the fundamental aims and protected values of the Antarctic Treaty System?
- What have been the responses of the ATCM to address these challenges? How do these responses relate to the self-management efforts of the International Association of Antarctic Tour Operators (IAATO)?
- Have the ATCM responses been successful or are there any remaining threats to the fundamental aims and protected values of the ATS? What are the future prospects?
- What observations can be made in relation to the role of the Committee for Environmental Protection and the characteristics of the ATS, such as the consensus rule?
- In view of the answers to these questions, what can be learned from ATCM's Antarctic tourism management for the broader question of whether the ATS may be considered 'resilient' to future challenges?

In discussing these questions, the 1992 proposal for a tourism annex and the many other proposals discussed at the ATCMs will be revisited. Special attention will be paid to the recent debates during the international workshop on Antarctic Tourism (Rotterdam, 3-5 April 2019) and the 42nd ATCM (Prague, 1-11 July 2019).

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