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## **Education as a Visitor Management Technique in Remote Protected Areas**

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### **Introduction**

Remote protected areas are often vulnerable to impacts by visitors. This is generally due to the dual implications of remoteness: a) the area's ecosystems remaining largely undisturbed by human activity (Carey, Dudley and Stolton, 2000) and b) minimal or absent visitor adaptation and monitoring due to logistical and financial constraints. However, despite the vulnerable nature of these spaces understanding of visitors' knowledge of visitation guidelines and actual behaviour is generally minimal, and often anecdotal, due to above-mentioned constraints limiting research and monitoring activity. From a management perspective this dynamic tends to become more problematic when the level of remoteness increases, as in general terms the protected area's scientific and/or historic value (if measured by level of disturbance) increases in line with management infrastructure decreasing. The sub Antarctic island of South Georgia (UK), which is deemed both ecologically and historically important, presents a pertinent case of a remote protected area experiencing these dynamics.

In South Georgia's case the challenges posed by vulnerability on the one hand and lack of empirically-grounded understanding of visitors' knowledge of visitation guidelines on the other are compounded by a steady increase in visitation over the last decade. Due to South Georgia's location in the middle of the South Atlantic (54° 30' S / 37° 0' W) and its strict policy prohibiting overnight landings visits (ship-based) are both temporally and spatially concentrated. With regard to implications for visitor management in other parts of the world, it has to be acknowledged that these dynamics are not common, yet they are not unique either as there are other remote islands that share a number of these dynamics.

Before the research aims and methodology are outlined a brief overview of tourism to South Georgia is provided. South Georgia received visits from 64 cruise ships during the 2009/10 season carrying 7,200 passengers (McKee, 2010). This represents a near doubling in passenger numbers over a five-year period. Likewise, yacht visits have been increasing over the same period to 20 visits carrying more than 80 passengers during the 2009/2010 season. While a variety of landing sites are visited by most ships, all are required to call into Grytviken for arrival processing. King Edward Point, located in the long-abandoned Norwegian Whaling settlement of Grytviken, is the only government office on South Georgia

staffed by two government officials whose main two duties relate to management of its fisheries and visitation to the island. In order to address the before-mentioned challenges of visitation to remote protected areas the Government of South Georgia and the South Sandwich Islands (GSGSSI) released a Tourism Management Policy in 2008. Because few resources are available to manage visitation to South Georgia the Tourism Management Policy, and the related Conduct While Ashore and Wildlife Protection Guidelines, rely on education as its central tool. Numerous guidelines are supported by pieces of regulation, however due to logistical and staffing constraints regarding compliance monitoring the thrust of the 2008 policy and its key objectives rests on visitor and ship operator education as a management tool, which is a common approach in protected areas (Eagles and McCool, 2002).

However, the policy's success in managing visitor impacts hinges on the core assumption that: a) all visitors receive education about visitation guidelines and regulations, b) that this education is converted into knowledge of the guidelines and regulations, and c) ultimately results in policy compliant behaviour by all visitors; including tourists, expedition staff, ship staff and crew. In recognition of this critical assumption, GSGSSI commissioned a large multi-method research project during the 2008/9 visitation season. This paper presents findings from the visitor survey which constituted a core component of the project as, amongst other things, it explored the important relationship between visitor's self-assessed level of knowledge of the visitation rules and actual knowledge of key rules and guidelines.

## **Method**

A self-complete questionnaire was selected as the most effective data collection technique because visits were highly concentrated in time with the great majority of visitors from each ship all re-embarking within a one-hour time frame. A variation of Cluster Sampling was used where all visitors from all ships visiting Grytviken during a 10 day period in January 2009 were invited to participate in the survey. A total of 345 useable questionnaires were collected which represents a 79.7% response rate.

## **Findings**

The findings reveal that respondents often overestimate their level of knowledge of visitation rules as they self-report a 'good' or 'very good' level of understanding of the rules despite providing incorrect answers to specific questions about regulation and guidelines. Additionally, significant variation exists between visitors' micro level understanding of guidelines related to minimum approach distances to wildlife, and macro level understanding of types of visitor activity that are prohibited on South Georgia. These

findings raise a number of important implications for the use of education in the management of remote protected areas.

### **References**

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Eagles, P.F.J. and S.F. McCool (2002) *Tourism in National Parks and Protected Areas: Planning and Management*. Wallingford: CABI

McKee, R. (2010) *Government of South Georgia and the South Sandwich Islands Update for IAATO Members June 2010*. Accessible: <http://www.sgisland.gs/download/GSGSSI%20update%20for%20IAATO%202010.pdf>