

Tourism and Political Change

18

Edited by Richard Butler and Wantanee Suntikul

Politics on Ice – Tourism in Antarctica

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18 Politics on Ice – Tourism in Antarctica

Thomas G. Bauer

Introduction

The Polar Regions form the northern and southernmost ends of the Earth. The Arctic is a frozen ocean surrounded by land that is under the governance of, and occupied by citizens of, the sovereign states of Iceland, Norway, Sweden, Finland, Russia, Canada, and the USA (State of Alaska), as well as the Danish dependency of Greenland. In contrast, Antarctica is an icy continent surrounded by the Southern Ocean, has no sovereign, and has never had a permanent human population.

Antarctica surrounds the geographic South Pole which is located 2825 m above sea level, and covers 13.9 million square kilometres, roughly twice the size of Australia. 98% of the continent is covered by a layer of ice which averages one and a half miles in thickness, (almost three miles thick at its maximum), and which holds some 70% of the world's fresh water reserves. Antarctica is the highest, coldest, windiest, driest, and remotest of all the continents and its landscape is dominated by ice sheets, glaciers, ice shelves, and mountains. Parts of the coastline and the offshore islands, in particular in the Antarctic Peninsula region, are areas where wildlife such as penguins, seals and flying sea birds congregate during the warmer summer months from October to March and where tourists, who mainly reach the continent aboard a variety of cruise ships, visit during the Antarctic tourism season, between late October and early March.

Antarctic history

For most of its 50 million years of ice-covered history Antarctica has not been subjected to any human interference with its natural processes. The earliest human interest in Antarctica dates back to the sixth century BC. As McGonigal (2008: 262) notes 'Antarctica is the only continent that, from the perspective of human thought, began as a sophisticated concept emerging from a series of deductions'. In the sixth century BC, Pythagoras calculated that the Earth was round and a century later Parmenides divided the world into five climatic zones and postulated that there were frigid zones at the poles. It was Aristotle in the fourth century BC who suggested that the landmasses of the Northern Hemisphere must be balanced a large landmass in the South: Terra Australis Incognita. On 17 January 1773 the *Resolution* and *Adventure* under James Cook became the first vessels to cross the Antarctic Circle but due to heavy ice they had

to retreat and did not sight land. Cook is quoted as saying that ‘no man will ever venture farther south than I have done, and...the lands which may lie to the South will never be explored’ (quoted in McGonigal 2008: 266). As with many other predictions this one did not hold true but many years passed between Cook’s comment and the first sighting of the continent in 1820 and the first landing on the continent by Bull, Borchgrevink and Kristensen at Cape Adare in 1895. The ‘heroic’ and largely nationalistic age of Antarctic exploration was to follow, culminating in the race to the South Pole between expeditions lead by the Norwegian Roald Amundsen and the Englishman Robert F. Scott. Amundsen reached the pole on 14 December 1911 and as is well known, Scott and his companions died on the way back from reaching the pole a little later in early 1912. As Damjanov (2006: 1) notes: ‘The attempts of geo-political powers to reach the Pole and settle there created a climate of colonial competition over the continent that was only ended by the legal regulation of the Antarctic Treaty in 1959. The Treaty proclaimed Antarctica as international space and ended Antarctica’s official colonial periods.’ In its early human history prior to 1820, Antarctica was *terra nullius* – no man’s land. Damjanov notes: ‘Its legal status was an open invitation to nation-states to colonize it’ (2006: 2). Today no visas or passports are required to enter Antarctica but such documents are necessary to leave the southern countries from whence ships to Antarctic leave.

Governance of Antarctica

Unlike every other tourist destination there is no ‘normal’ political structure in Antarctica. There is no local, regional, provincial or central government that is responsible for the administration of the continent. Instead, Antarctica is administered under the Antarctic Treaty and its associated conventions, protocols and recommendations, collectively known as the Antarctic Treaty System (ATS). Bauer (2001: 53) notes that many of the complexities of Antarctic tourism have their origins in the unique legal and political situation of the continent. Seven countries (Argentina, Australia, Chile, France, New Zealand, Norway and the United Kingdom) claim territory, largely based on discovery and/or geographical proximity. These claims to territorial sovereignty are, however, not universally recognized. To reduce the dangers of international armed conflict, the twelve countries that had established scientific bases in Antarctica during the International Geophysical Year 1957/58 negotiated the Antarctic Treaty. The Treaty was signed on 1 December 1959 and came into force on 23 June 1961. Damjanov (2006: 2) notes: ‘Complicated and conflicting political situations about claimed areas that were overlapping [in the Antarctic Peninsula, Great Britain, Chile and Argentina lay claim to the same regions], and the tendencies of claiming nations to physically explore the resources of their “nation-state extensions”, ended with the Antarctic Treaty in 1959.’ Under the Treaty (Article VI) the area south of 60 degree South latitude, including all ice shelves, is technically governed by none of the nation-states, but by an international regime established by the Treaty. At the core of this piece of international law is Article IV, which basically states that countries agree to disagree on the issue of sovereignty. It reads:

Nothing contained in the present Treaty shall be interpreted as:

- *A renunciation by any Contracting Party of previously asserted rights of or claims to sovereignty in Antarctica;*

Chapter extract

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