

A COMMENTARY ON POLAR TOURISM CONFERENCES IN THE INTERNATIONAL POLAR YEAR (2007-2009)

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Introduction and Summary

Perhaps one of the most useful developments for polar tourism research during the International Polar Year (IPY) has been the increased opportunity for groups involved in the industry (researchers, students, community members, operators, etc.) to meet and network. This level of coordination (whether overtly planned or not) has not happened since the early 1990s (see Kempf & Girard, 1992; Johnston & Haider, 1993; Martin & Tyler, 1995) except in the instances of the annual operators meetings of groups such as the Association of Expedition Cruise Operators (AECO) and the International Association of Antarctica Tour Operators (IAATO). Conferences covered in this commentary include those in Oulu, Finland (November/December 2007); Gjesvaer, Norway (May 2008); Kangiqsujuaq, Canada (August 2008); and Vienna, Austria (October 2008).

The *Tourism and Global Change in Polar Regions* conference held in Oulu was one of the few tourism projects officially linked to the IPY. The conference was organized jointly by the International Geographical Union's Commission on the Geography of Tourism, Leisure and Global Change and the Thule Institute at the University of Oulu. This conference provided an excellent opportunity for a broad spectrum of polar tourism researchers to network early on in the IPY and share their recent research findings. The

conference included presentations on tourism research in both the Arctic and Antarctic, keynote addresses by Dr. Murray Simpson and Professor C. Michael Hall, as well as an excellent social program. Simpson, while not known for his polar work, examined tourism's global dilemmas in the face of climate change generally, while Hall examined the issues and challenges of this topic at high latitudes. Perhaps the two outstanding pieces of the conference included the breadth of speakers, as well as the extended field excursion following the initial two days of standard conference presentations. Speakers came from across the globe and from a variety of disciplines, but there were indeed the usual slate of a few presentations that did not entirely fit the conference theme – in this case one on light pollution in Southern Spain. The conference excursion took participants to Rovaniemi (home of Santa Claus), Ruka (site of a World Cup ski jumping competition at that time), and Oulanka National Park; where important networking and discussion could take place on the bus, and where important issues could be seen versus only talked about. Outcomes of this conference include: the proceedings (Saarinen & Tervo, 2008), a 2008 journal special issue (Fennia 186(1)) and a book in press (Hall & Saarinen, in press).

The next two conferences were held as initial meetings of two newly developed groups: the University of the Arctic Thematic Network on Northern Tourism (UATNNT) and the International Polar Tourism Research Network (IPTRN). The UATNNT (see <http://www.uarctic.org/compactarticles.aspx?m=595>) was established by a working group of researchers from tertiary institutions across the circumpolar north. The institutions that each researcher belonged to are members of the virtual University of the Arctic (see <http://www.uarctic.org>) and thus delegates (9 in total) were individually invited to

Gjesvaer first and foremost as an opportunity to share their personal interests in polar tourism, but also because their institutions' support for the field the of tourism. From this starting point the group sought to envision how these multiple interests and levels of support might fit together under the umbrella of a thematic network and in turn support a graduate program of some description.

Sletvold and Maher (2008) presented the group's declaration from the working group meeting in Gjesvaer, Norway along with a proposal for a joint-master's program to the University of the Arctic's Council meeting in Edmonton, Alberta, Canada in June 2008. The network was approved in Edmonton and has funds to operate for the next two years, continuing Master's program discussions amongst other topics. Under the umbrella of the University of the Arctic, members in this network represent their own expertise, but must be connected to a University of the Arctic member institution. Additionally, through the University of the Arctic's structure this network is equally split between functions of teaching and research or rather teaching informed by research as presented in the Master's program. Besides the informal discussions the group also enjoyed a bird safari from Gjesvaer on North Cape Island to the bird cliffs of the Gjesværstappan nature reserve, and an evening trip to enjoy the midnight sun at Nordkapp.

The IPTRN was initiated as a second outcome to the polar tourism sessions held at the 2006 Canadian Association of Geographer's conference in Thunder Bay, the first outcome being the 2007 special issue of the journal *Polar Geography* (see Maher, 2007). Following two years of initial set up the IPTRN held its first meeting in Kangiqsujaq, Nunavik in August 2008 (see www.polartourismnetwork.uqam.ca). The IPTRN conference served as a bit of a combination of the two earlier conferences in that it had

standard conference presentations by each of the academic attendees, but also had room for discussion on the organization of the network. While the cost of attending a conference in the remote community of Kangiqsujuaq was a limiting factor it did allow for increased community involvement (although community delegates came and went). Dr. Debra Enzenbacher gave a general keynote address that served as an overview to polar tourism, which was then added to by the specific research projects of the other attendees.

As a result of this initial meeting, the IPTRN has been founded as a group with a shared interest in research that advances the understanding of tourism in and about the Polar Regions. The IPTRN strives to generate, share and disseminate knowledge, resources and perspectives on polar tourism, and strongly supports the development of international collaboration and cooperative relationships between members. Membership in the network can include individuals such as university researchers, consultants, tourism operators, government organizations, community members, and graduate students.

The outcome of the IPTRN conference will be a book (see Grenier & Müller, in press). During the four day conference in Kangiqsujuaq a variety of field trips were organized. The conference started with a visit to the Pingualuit Parc Nationale du Québec; a new park for the province of Québec where the delegates hiked up to the crater rim and got a local interpretation of the area. The second day included a guided tour at the local museum, and the third day a cultural evening walk through Kangiqsujuaq. The last conference day ended with a mountain hike outside Kangiqsujuaq with a fantastic view over the township and surrounding fjords and mountains.

The Vienna Symposium on Polar Tourism was initiated on a single researcher's desire to better link his own research in the high altitudes with the IPY and his perception that there must be research occurring at high latitudes as well. This self-initiation, generally outside of the circles of the other three conferences, actually led the Vienna Symposium to be quite unique. While the depth of polar tourism knowledge presented was not the same as that found in the other instances, the Vienna symposium had more breadth in connecting to Russian researchers (largely due to Austria's historic connections). An outcome of the symposium, actually ready by the time the symposium took place, is the proceedings (Breiling, 2008) available online.

The Vienna Symposium also produced a declaration of the discussion held, which was subsequently presented to European funding and research agencies. Within the declaration the themes of education, networking, interdisciplinarity, and impacts were identified along with some important information needs. The educational components, such as focused exchange programs between institutions, field programs and collaborative masters programs were seen as extremely important as to engage students in the historical tradition in the field. Beyond education of students, there was seen to be a need for established operators and academics to become aware of the amount of data that already exists on the topic, expanding work on polar tourism to integrate more geographic locations (i.e. Russia) and add to the predominantly social science perspective that currently exists.

Networking encompassed the key starting point for future projects and meeting more of the people involved equates to encountering a wider breadth of ideas. It is very important that we learn of the differing opinions and learn about what's going on in a

variety of countries with polar interests. While there are separate distinct groups interested in a variety of aspects involving polar tourism, the real value is in integrating these groups and moving beyond what could be considered separate cliques. Overall it is good to see the growing interest on the topic as evidenced by the recent networking options of this symposium and others. Hopefully contacts can be kept and lead to new possibilities in areas of the Arctic that are well known as well as others that we do not hear much about.

Interdisciplinarity was a key component of the Vienna Symposium. Those in attendance provided a number of different perspectives and a means to assist seemingly narrow specializations with wider fields. In general, discussion centred around the fact that future conferences should be larger in their scope as even a topic such as microbiology can relate to polar tourism in terms of changing landscapes; tourism changing climates, ecosystems, etc. It was discussed that the study of polar tourism is a topic that crosses boundaries with a foot in science and a foot in art. It is these interconnections that make for an interesting conference. While physical/natural science is usually science for the scientists, there is the need to make future conferences more accessible, which is often where social science fits. Social science brings in the 'human language' and not just the numbers. An interdisciplinary approach is the future, meeting across the spectrum, and the Polar Regions make a good example of where this can happen.

The discussion of the wide ranging impacts of polar tourism largely focused around the subject of climate change; i.e. it is both a driver of climate change and effected by it. Questions related to the tremendous CO² impacts from tourism, and what that is doing to

the nature/ecosystems of the Polar Regions. In addition, with the primary focus of the industry being cruise-based, the port of call regulations in place were questioned as ships are getting continually larger and there are differences in the types of limits that need to be placed on well established destinations/gateways (i.e. Ushuaia) versus smaller, new destinations (i.e. coastal communities throughout Nunavut and Nunavik, Canada).

As was the case at the preceding meetings mentioned there was the call that more objective, empirical information is needed. More large scale research projects need to take place that share with the entire community (researchers, governments, operators, communities, etc.) across the globe. There are widespread hard science needs in terms of impact monitoring and providing baselines, but again perhaps there are actually more interdisciplinary needs – projects that combine topics such as mitigating impacts, while also examining the production of memorable experiences.

Conference excursions in Vienna included a visit to the Albertina Museum and the Polar Exhibition “Infinite Ice: Traversing the Arctic and the Alps from 1860 to the Present” about Austrian polar expeditions and polar photographic art. The conference ended with a guided tour to the Vienna Zoo’s Polarium at the Schönbrunner Tiergarten, Vienna. Here the delegates got a back-stage tour at the Polarium and the refrigerated areas for penguins, sea lions and polar bears.

Commentary and synthesis

While there are obviously similarities between each of these conferences, it is our belief that they each actually contribute a fair amount to the growth of knowledge on polar tourism through their differences. The first similarity was in the participants. While there were a number of individuals who attended more than one of the

conferences, only one person (the first author of this note) attended all four. Thus, the difference was felt in the differences of opinion and new voices brought to each table. From the 'usual suspects' in the polar tourism field at the Oulu and UATNNT conferences, to the community members at the IPTRN conference, and a separate group including Russian academics in Vienna – this diversity with at least one common link is exciting for the field, especially if the dialogue at each can be dispersed with all; an important reason for this commentary.

As opposed to the Oulu conference, the UATNNT conference was smaller in scale, and sought to be more discussionary and progressive in hashing out network details than presenting standard conference workshops. It was assumed that participants had a base line of knowledge and that we could as a group actively move forward from that point.

The polar versus northern delineation, membership of private individuals versus University of the Arctic educational institutions, and solely a research focus are what differentiate the IPTRN from the UATNNT. While the IPTRN conference did include a number of the regular academic participants from Oulu and Gjesvaer, its inclusion of community members (beyond just operating tours for delegates) is to be commended. However, this community inclusion occasionally made for confusion as academics tuned their presentations to a more general level, and community members often attended few sessions with regularity. Governmental linkages to the IPTRN conference, in terms of funding and attendance, made for some excellent local linkages to be made.

Given the date of the Vienna Symposium, future networking opportunities have already presented themselves. With the yearly meetings of the University of the Arctic Thematic Network on Northern Tourism, one Russian participant in Vienna has now

already attended the second UATNNT meeting in Svalbard – June 2009. As the next of the bi-annual meetings of the International Polar Tourism Research Network is scheduled for Abisko, Sweden in 2010 there is even more possibility to connect the different academic circles. In addition, at the Svalbard UATNNT meeting it was decided to hold the third meeting for this group in Abisko, Sweden, or nearby, just before the next IPTRN conference. This sort of planning will further enhance the ability of attendees at all four conferences to continue their discussion and networking.

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