

## IAATO Makes Recommendations on Antarctic Passenger Vessel Marine Safety at 20<sup>th</sup> Annual Meeting in Providence, RI, USA

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*June 26, 2009, Providence, RI...* The International Association of Antarctica Tour Operators (IAATO) took action to further enhance marine safety among its vessel-operating members at its annual meeting earlier this month in Providence, RI, USA. Members also recognized that climate change poses the most significant threat to the Antarctic environment, and created a working group to investigate methods to further reduce tourism's carbon footprint, and to raise awareness among passengers of its implications.

The statement of actions to enhance marine safety was approved by members, following the mid-April 2009 release of the "Report of Investigation in the Matter of Sinking of Passenger Vessel *EXPLORER* (O.N. 8495) 23 November, 2007 in the Bransfield Strait near the South Shetland Islands" and the report's review by the IAATO marine committee.

"As we stated in April, when the Liberian flag-state report on G.A.P Adventure's *Explorer* was released, our marine committee was tasked with assessing what specific advice could be put in place as Industry Best Practice prior to the upcoming 2009-2010 season," said Steve Wellmeier, executive director of IAATO. "We believe these recommended changes to the standard operating procedures of our members, as well as changes in our Bylaws and further actions to be taken, reflect our commitment to safe and environmentally responsible private-sector travel to Antarctica."

The recommendations also took into consideration several more recent, although less momentous, incidents involving IAATO-member operated vessels: the grounding of the *MV Ushuaia* in December 2008 and the grounding of the *MV Ocean Nova* in February 2009.

The approved changes in standard operating procedures for IAATO SOLAS passenger vessels include: (1) mandatory participation in the IAATO satellite vessel tracking system by October 1, 2010, with hourly reporting while operating in Antarctic waters; (2) strong encouragement to those member with open lifeboats to refit their vessels with partially or totally enclosed lifeboats (currently, just four of 43 IAATO member-operated vessels have open lifeboats); and (3) compliance, as far as reasonable and practical, with the International Maritime Organization's (IMO) Guidelines for Ships Operating in Polar Waters by the 2010-2011 season.

Members at the annual meeting also approved a change in IAATO Bylaws to strengthen the requirements for experience of bridge officers aboard IAATO-member vessels. The change specifies that, "[IAATO] organizers operating vessels that will travel south of 60°

South Latitude must have a captain or appointed ice pilot with Antarctic experience suitable for their intended operation. Depending on the intended operation, it may be necessary to have additional relevant Antarctic experience among the bridge officers.”

The new phrasing considers the various types of cruise experiences – i.e. the “intended operation” – offered by IAATO members, ranging from expeditions aboard smaller vessels with ice-strengthened hulls that travel into Antarctic coastal and island harbors for landings to “cruise-only” mid-summer voyages aboard larger ships that stay in well-charted waters and generally clear of the shoreline and any ice cover.

In addition, members requested that the marine committee continue to develop – by July 31, 2009 – additional recommendations for IAATO-member vessel operators, and that IAATO provide a forum for the review, discussion and enhancement of members’ Crisis Management Plans. And, finally, as part of the “IAATO Actions to Enhance Marine Safety,” the members approved continued development of the Tiered-Risk Assessment Plan.

The Tiered-Risk Assessment is a multifaceted plan that will allow operators to evaluate risk during voyage planning, preparation and execution phases, with consideration given to seasonal and geographic variations, expected risk, historic and real-time information available (ice, weather, sea conditions), as well as contingency and mitigation measures.

Representatives from G.A.P Adventures, operator of the *Explorer* and an IAATO member, attended the meeting and acknowledged the significant impact that the 2007 sinking has had on the entire Antarctic tourism industry. They put forward for the benefit of other IAATO vessel operators at the meeting a list of “lessons learned” recommendations, and agreed to carry an observer on an early voyage of the company’s new vessel, the *Expedition*, which begins her maiden season in Antarctica in November 2009.

More than 100 members, governmental representatives and Antarctica-related organizations from 14 countries attended the four-day meeting in Providence. Other approved results of the meeting included:

- A motion recognizing that modern climate change is a significant threat to the Antarctic environment, and that IAATO can raise awareness, motivate behavior change and inspire others on this issue through its members’ first-hand experience and expertise in managing tourism on the White Continent. A new IAATO working group was formed to explore ways to mitigate members’ contributions to climate change and reduce tourism’s carbon footprint.
- Eight associate members were approved as voting members, and nine new organizations joined as either associate or affiliate members. IAATO now has 109 members, and represents all SOLAS passenger vessels operating in Antarctic waters.
- Reappointment of the IAATO executive committee, which consists of Cees Deelstra (chair) of Holland America Lines; Erica Wikander of Quark Expeditions;

Ted Cheeseman of Cheesemans' Ecology Safaris; and Ute Hohn-Bowen of Antarpplly Expeditions.

- Agreement to review and update members' bio-security procedures, which have led the field in minimizing the chance of introducing non-native species to the Antarctic environment. Another IAATO-led initiative – recently taken up by a number of governmental Antarctic programs – is intended to prevent the chance of seabirds striking vessels at night.
- A new five-year strategic plan was approved, which will assist the organization's executive committee and secretariat to set management priorities and budgets in light of the current downturn in the economy and its impact on Antarctic tourism. Overall visitor numbers dropped 17% during the 2008-2009 season to 38,200 visitors from the peak 2007-2008 number of 46,265 Antarctic visitors.
- A new online training and assessment program geared for IAATO Antarctic expedition leaders and field staff, along with a new logbook to develop an accreditation and certification program for field staff.
- Agreement on work to be done in developing new Antarctic site guidelines, including some for inland continental locations. The site guidelines – many of which have been initiated by IAATO – are management tools to assist members while conducting guided tours ashore.
- A round table discussion among members and Antarctic Treaty Parties present (the US, UK and Australia) on the challenges, opportunities and concerns facing both governments and operators, and how all involved can most effectively work together to ensure sensible Antarctic tourism management and regulatory strategies.

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IAATO is a member organization founded in 1991 to advocate, promote and practice safe and environmentally responsible private-sector travel to the Antarctic. IAATO currently has 109 members worldwide. Members work together to develop, adopt and implement operational standards that mitigate potential environmental impacts. Numerous operating procedures and guidelines have been adopted over the last 19 years that have proven to be successful methods for avoiding impacts, including site-specific guidelines, site selection criteria, passengers-to-staff ratios, limiting numbers of passengers ashore, boot-washing guidelines and the prevention of the transmission of alien organisms, wilderness etiquette, garbage policy, ship scheduling and vessel communications procedures, emergency medical evacuation procedures, emergency contingency plans, reporting procedures, marine wildlife watching guides, station visitation policies and more.

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