

Research Article

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Antarctic civics: how tourists to Antarctica view their role as “Antarctic ambassadors” and how to change it

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Abstract

“Antarctic Ambassadorship” has emerged as an important concept in tourism, conservationist, and polar research communities. This article investigates tourists’ perceptions of “Antarctic Ambassadorship” through surveys and interviews conducted during and shortly after their travel to Antarctica, from 2015 to 2018. Interpretations of the term “Antarctic ambassador” varied widely but most hesitated to identify themselves this way. Tourists were not sure how to enact “Ambassadorship” or whether the actions they did take would “count.” Our findings suggest that the industry has great potential to promote Antarctic Ambassadorship by providing concrete ideas about what Ambassadorship might entail and offering tools for tourists to take concrete actions. We suggest a shift towards a focus on “Antarctic Civics” that would educate travellers about how Antarctica is governed and which institutions are responsible for its conservation, in order to empower tourists to engage in political advocacy in addition to personal lifestyle changes.

Introduction

In December 2013, the Russian expedition ship *MV Akademik Shokalskiy* left Bluff, New Zealand, for the Ross Sea in Antarctica. The voyage was titled “The Spirit of Mawson,” in honour of the famous Australian explorer Douglas Mawson. The 2013 trip was billed as a reenactment of Mawson’s 1912 Antarctic voyage, which ended in disaster (Dash, 2012). Unfortunately, the disaster of that historical journey was also to be reenacted, albeit in a less tragic way. On Christmas Eve of 2013, the *Akademik Shokalskiy* and her 74 passengers became trapped in unusually thick pack ice. When she put out a distress call, other ships came to her aid. French, Australian, and Chinese Icebreakers, including the *Aurora Australis* and the *Xue Long*, could not reach the *Akademik Shokalskiy* because of the ice, but the *Xue Long* was able to evacuate her passengers by helicopter. The crew remained on board until the ship was freed, and the *Akademik Shokalskiy* returned to Bluff on 14 January.

The 2013 voyage did not end with injury, loss of life, or the eating of sled dogs. It was also not the first disaster involving a tourism vessel in Antarctica (see Liggett, McIntosh, Thompson, Gilbert, & Storey, 2011). Nevertheless, the voyage came under heavy criticism. Despite the scientific aspirations of the *Akademik Shokalskiy*, a note from a research scientist at Casey Station dubbed it “that tourist ship,” noting that her rescue had delayed the arrival of needed scientific equipment and long-planned research agendas (Revkin, 2013). He wrote that the “Spirit of Mawson” was “a mashup of adventure travel, media event and science” [sic] and wondered whether the expedition was worth what its rescue had cost by diverting other ships from their own schedules. The situation with the *Akademik Shokalskiy* fed into an ongoing conversation about the role of tourism to Antarctica. Although there was no evidence of negligence on the part of the crew, this event raised the question about whether tourism in general was interfering with the “real” business of scientific research on the continent. This distinction is not as clear as it might seem; there are few vessels in Antarctica, and so touristic expeditions and scientific vessels rely on each other to respond to emergencies and transport passengers, scientists, and supplies. One of the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic was a growing realisation of how tightly touristic and scientific infrastructures (especially transportation) are interwoven in Antarctica (Nielsen et al., 2022). Many further defended the Antarctic tourism industry by arguing that safe and regulated tourism is instrumental to the protection of the continent, as many visitors are transformed by their experiences into “Antarctic Ambassadors” who would work to protect the continent for further scientific research and conservation.

The overall goal of the ongoing research of our team, “The Antarctic Travel Experience Project,” is to investigate how travellers to Antarctica think about their relationships with that

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environment and how their perspectives change as a result of their travels. In this article, we consider how travellers understand the concept of Antarctic Ambassadorship, drawing on data from two seasons of surveys and interviews (2015–2016 and 2017–2018). In addition, we draw on the knowledge of our authors. One (Roedel) has worked in the Antarctica tourism industry for over 27 seasons since 1992, as an expedition staff and expedition leader, and another (Griffin) worked in Antarctic tourism as an expedition staff member for six seasons since 2014.

Protecting what you know

Many in the Antarctica tourism business use the phrase “People do not protect what they do not know” to defend the importance of tourism to the region. This saying is usually attributed to Lars-Eric Lindblad, a pioneer in expedition travel who began leading tourists to Antarctica in 1966. Interestingly, the phrase “People do not protect what they do not know” does not appear in Lindblad’s autobiography (Lindblad & Fuller, 1983). The statement is reminiscent of an earlier quote from Baba Dioum, a Senegalese ecologist, in his 1968 speech to the General Assembly of the International Union for Conservation of Nature in New Delhi, India: “In the end, we will conserve only what we love; we will love only what we understand and we will understand only what we are taught.” This idea is also reflected in governmental institutes such as Antarctica New Zealand, which has the slogan “Antarctica and the Southern Ocean: Valued, Protected, Understood” (Antarctica New Zealand *n.d.*). Regardless of its authorship and specific phrasing, the idea is a powerful one in the Antarctic tourism industry (Vila, Costa, Angulo-Preckler, Sarda, & Avila, 2016). Lindblad is often quoted by expedition staff working there today, and they believe his quote to be an accurate description of the transformation they sometimes see in tourists. Roedel has heard many tour guides share stories of travellers suddenly realising the magnificence, beauty, and fragility of Antarctica in light of global climate change and becoming powerfully motivated to protect this space and share it with others. Some of these cases are high profile enough to be documented publicly. Forrest Mars Jr. of M&M’s was so impressed by Antarctica, for example, that he financed trips there for high school students from his alma mater (Kirsch, 2016).

Below, after discussing the results of our own data, we compare our findings to those of Alexander *et al.*’s (Alexander, Liggett, Leane, Nielsen, Bailey, Brasier, & Haward, 2020) insights to identify points of congruence and divergence between expert and tourist constructions of Antarctic Ambassadorship. Finally, we conclude with recommendations to promote “Ambassadorship” in ways that encourage tourists to exercise political and economic influence for the protection of the continent. We end by noting that after this research was conducted, there was a major push initiated in 2000 by IAATO (the International Association of Antarctica Tour Operators) to promote Antarctic Ambassadorship. We hope that this data, which pre-dates those efforts, will allow for future research to show the impacts of IAATO’s important work.

Methods

Our data include surveys and interviews conducted with tourists during two seasons of Antarctic tourism during the austral summer months of October to April. These tourists travelled to Antarctica on expedition ships leaving from Ushuaia, Argentina, in the seasons of 2015–2016 and 2017–2018. The survey questions and raw anonymized data from both seasons, as well as the 2018–

2019 season, are available at the Bucknell University Digital Commons (Sammells, Roedel, Griffin, 2023; Sammells, Roedel, Griffin, Busato, 2023a, 2023b).

During the 2015–2016 season, we distributed a survey to Antarctic travellers on six expeditions on two different ships. A paper brochure was left in each tourist cabin, offering a link to the online survey through Qualtrics. Expedition staff (including Roedel) reminded tourists to complete the survey if they were willing. A few respondents from other ships found the survey through internet searches. One hundred and sixty-four travellers completed the survey. None of the survey questions required participants to provide an answer.

Some of the survey questions were taken from other, larger surveys in the hope of producing comparable data. For example, our Q35 was taken from a study by Colmar Brunton on behalf of Antarctica New Zealand (2011), a study of public opinion conducted in that nation. The question solicited Likert scale responses to “How important do you think it is that your nation’s government” with sub-questions of “Helps to protect the environment in Antarctic,” “Helps with marine research in Antarctica,” “Helps with climate change research in Antarctica,” “Helps with land-based research in Antarctica,” “Helps manage sustainable fisheries,” and “Supports programmes to raise awareness about Antarctica.”

Brown then conducted phone interviews with 26 volunteers who voluntarily provided contact information on the survey. All of the interviewees were residents in the USA: 19 were women; 7 were men.

Given what we learned during the 2015–2016 season of data collection, our methods changed slightly for the 2017–2018 season. Internet access on Antarctic expedition ships is often inconsistent and frustratingly slow due to the lack of satellite coverage in the polar region. We therefore distributed paper surveys to travellers on six expeditions on three different ships, in the hope of improving response rates. In order to fit the survey on a single printed page, we chose a subset of the questions used on the 2015–2016 internet survey. The Ushuaia Tourism Office, INFUETUR, graciously assisted us in distributing paper surveys to expedition staff, who then distributed the surveys to their passengers onboard. Expedition staff members collected and returned the paper surveys to the INFUETUR office, and these were then mailed to the authors in the USA to be analysed. We collected survey responses from a total of 362 travellers. Seventeen phone interviews were conducted by Brice with those who volunteered contact information. Of these interviewees, 10 were women, 7 were men, 16 were resident in the USA, and 1 was resident in Germany. All phone interviews were, with the participants’ permission, recorded, transcribed, and coded for themes using NVivo qualitative analysis software. All research protocols were reviewed and approved by the Bucknell University Institutional Review Board (IRB nos. 1516-053, 1516-116, and 1718-057). Despite the small changes in methods between the two seasons, the general focus of our questions remained consistent, allowing us to draw general parallels.

Antarctic travellers are not representative of the national populations from which they originate, nor is our data representative either of the population of the USA or of Antarctic tourists in general. Tourism companies tend to attract specific national populations, based on the languages spoken onboard and companies’ marketing strategies. Smaller expedition ships, such as the ones on which we conducted surveys, attract a different demographic than larger ships. Smaller ships are defined as having fewer than 200 passengers that can be taken ashore in

zodiac boats. Ships with more than 500 passengers are not allowed to land passengers in Antarctica.

We are aware that survey questions often elicit simple responses to what both researchers and respondents recognise to be complicated questions. Nevertheless, our survey data give a sense of broad trends, while phone interviews provided nuance and depth. It is a common challenge in the social sciences to balance breadth with depth of data and one we addressed through this mixed-method approach.

Survey results

The primary demographics of the survey groups for both seasons are roughly similar. While we do not have sufficient data to make inferences about historical trends, during these two seasons most tourists we surveyed were US citizens, older, well-educated, and well-travelled. Almost 90% had at least a college degree (95% in 2015–2016, 88.67% in 2017–2018), over 80% were older than 55 years of age (84.76% and 86.19%, respectively), and more than half were retired (60.87%, 60.77%). In terms of age and educational level, our sample appears roughly similar to samples of other researchers of Antarctic tourism (Cajiao, Leung, Larson, Tejedo, & Benayas, 2022).

As one might expect, our sample, which comprised entirely of people who had travelled to Antarctica, had few claims on Q35 that *any* issue about Antarctica was “not at all important”; the highest percentage for this response was 1.3%. Compared to the Colmar Brunton study (2011) from which the question was taken (with responses from 1002 New Zealanders), our survey respondents were more likely to note that a government’s role is “very important” when it comes to helping to “protect the environment in Antarctica” (58.4% vs. 53%) and promoting “climate change research in Antarctica” (56% vs. 35%). This difference could be due to a number of factors, including the shift in attitudes from 2011 to 2015, the different nationalities involved, and the fact that our sample is exclusively people who have travelled to Antarctica. It is notable, however, that both US and New Zealand respondents in the two studies showed a strong inclination towards their own governments making efforts to protect the continent. This further suggests that offering tourists tools for communicating this desire to their respective governments (as we will discuss below) would be welcome.

Tourist perspectives towards Antarctic Ambassadorship

During our interviews, many commented on the silence, purity, and untouched nature of Antarctica, as well as the joy of seeing penguins, whales, seals, and other animals. Another ethnographer who interviewed Antarctic tourists noted the theme of “magic” in discourses about the continent (Picard, 2015). While our respondents did not often use the word “magic,” they did talk about their experiences as “indescribable,” “unbelievable,” and often described Antarctica as “pristine” and “quiet.”

How these tourists thought about these experiences in relationship to their understandings of “Antarctic Ambassadorship” is more nuanced, however. While there was a continuum of how much they identified with the term itself, their feelings about whether they were “Ambassadors” did not correspond to what they actually *did* after they returned home. Almost all our interviewees discussed their travels in Antarctica with others. Most shared photos and memories with friends and family; a handful gave formal presentations to classes or other groups. One interviewee talked to friends about

global warming, another wrote a newspaper article, and a third presented a slideshow at the school where they worked. But only a few considered such moments to rise to the level of “Ambassadorship,” either in the sense of promoting touristic travel to Antarctica (although this is not the definition that IAATO promotes; we will discuss this more below) or in the sense of offering teaching moments about global climate change and environmental protection. Most instead talked about these moments as simply sharing their unique experiences.

While many interviewees wanted to promote knowledge and love of Antarctica, all but one was cautious about definitively claiming the title of “ambassador” for themselves. For example, one US woman in her 60s who travelled to Antarctica in 2017 expressed that she came away from that trip believing in climate change, although she and her fiancé were “pretty conservative” and previously she did not believe it was an issue. (She was the only interviewee in our sample to experience this kind of radical shift in perspective on the issue of climate change.) After her trip, she saw herself as an ambassador on a small scale:

My fiancé does make videos of all of our trips, so we have an awesome Antarctica video and we’ve shared it with a lot of our friends. So we’re Ambassadors in sort of a small little circle. One of the naturalists [on their expedition] said, “Well, maybe you can put it out in your community that you’ve been to Antarctica and share things with other people.” And we haven’t really done that. It’s been more sharing it with friends and, you know, like my fiancé’s customers and things. . . . That’s how we’ve been an ambassador, but not really anything that’s been formal or broad.

Another woman in her 60s who travelled in the 2017 season described her Ambassadorship as “low-key”:

An ambassador, I would think that it was people that share their experiences with other people who might not ever get a chance to go. I think it would be a case of spreading awareness, educating other people. . . . I would describe myself as a low-key ambassador, I’m not the type that would go give a slideshow at a rotary club or anything like that, but I do bring it up in conversation.

The ambiguity that the two tourists above felt about being labelled as an “Antarctic Ambassadors” was a common theme in interviews. Many explicitly questioned whether they would qualify for this title. Their uncertainties were twofold: first, about what ambassadorship means and how to define it in this context, and second, whether their own actions would meet that standard. Many “hesitators” hoped that their conversations with others would have a positive impact but hesitated to make claims about whether these efforts were effective. For example, this US woman in her late 60s from the 2015–2016 season told us:

Oh, I haven’t heard that [the term “Antarctic Ambassador”]. I suppose I don’t have any bad feelings about it. I think in a way what it implies is that more than just experiencing Antarctica for ourselves, that it’s almost a duty to convey how wonderful it really is and how there’s a need for protecting it, our future.

Another US woman in her late 50s said the title was “cool sounding” but that “I don’t think of myself that way. I suppose since I talk to people about the place, that makes me some kind of ambassador, seeing as there’s so few people who go.” Meanwhile, a US woman in her 30s told us:

I don’t know in terms of if I ever really thought about it with an official title to it, but I mean as soon as I came home, goodness knows, like I said, I talked about it to anybody who would listen. So it’s certainly not a title I would shy away from, and yes, I think it is important that those of us who get to go there share what we’ve seen, share what we’ve learned and what we experienced.

And another US woman in her late 50s said:

I think it's easy for people to adopt that role and become an ambassador when it comes up in conversation but there's no overreaction that's taken as a result of that ambassador position. You know what I mean? You can talk about it if somebody asks, but you don't do anything differently than you would've before.

This woman also didn't think most travellers to Antarctica went there focused on "conservation efforts" but rather their own experiences. "I mean the whole focus is on enjoying and having fun and learning, and so the focus of the travellers on a cruise is very different than what you need for education to appreciate and help effective change in the environment."

And a US man in his late 40s asked the interviewer whether being an ambassador was the same as being an activist, before saying that he was the former, not the latter:

I guess when you use the word ambassador, the question I have is like are you talking about being an activist? Or being a proponent towards it, but not active, right? So I haven't come back and become like an activist, but I would be a positive ambassador.

We cannot make any claims about how much the conversations our interviewees had with others impacted those they spoke to, as those people were not part of our sample. While our interviewees often told us that travellers to Antarctica gained "awareness" about environmental and climate change issues, they usually ascribed such changes to *other* travellers, rather than describing this "awareness" as a personal experience. Only one (discussed above) reported a radical shift in her own perspective as a result of seeing Antarctica. It is also worth noting that since knowledge about climate change is very politicised in the USA, awareness does not translate neatly into either ideology or concrete action (e.g. Hamilton, Cutler, & Schaefer, 2012).

Both our surveys and interviews indicated that most tourists in our dataset were already concerned about global climate change before they travelled to Antarctica. It was also common for them to hope to inspire such environmental "awareness" in others (either fellow passengers or people back home) by sharing their new experiential knowledge about Antarctica. One US man in his mid-70s, travelling in the 2017–2018 season, told us:

... I feel privileged, because so few people get to go down there. And by being able to share it with everyone that I know makes me feel a bit empowered to help with the environment in general. And uh, it gives me a nice feeling.

A US woman in her 50s, travelling in the 2015–2016 season, echoed him but with more hesitation about what the impact would actually be:

I think that anybody who's been there [to Antarctica] is an unofficial ambassador because you're one of the tiny minuscule percentage of human beings on this planet that have been privileged enough to see it, and experience it, and talk about it. Whether you talk about it eloquently or not, you have information and experience that most people don't. So I think unofficially, you are an unofficial ambassador. I can't imagine anybody going to Antarctica and coming away hating it and saying don't bother, I just can't imagine that. ... Unofficial ambassadors as tourists? Not, not convinced. No, I don't think, it's difficult to, I can't even think of anything that you could do that's concrete that would really make an impact. I can't think of anything.

"Awareness" can be a vague concept. Very few interviewees reported concretely changing their own actions as a result of travel to Antarctica, either in terms of financial support for conservation organisations, political actions, or consumption patterns. In

interviews, none talked about travelling less to reduce their carbon footprint; most were extremely widely travelled, and for many, Antarctica was their "seventh continent." When asked specifically about the environmental impacts of their travel to Antarctica, most focused on issues such as how people interact with wildlife, rather than the larger structural issues that made such travel possible in the first place, such as the carbon consumption needed for the trip. This is part of the "paradox" of Antarctic Ambassadorship; many who travel there are already environmentally conscious, and so this experience does not radically alter their perceptions nor their actions at home (Cajiao *et al.*, 2022; Eijgelaar, Thaper, & Peeters, 2010).

In short, Antarctic travellers tend to experience a disjuncture between their "awareness" of environmental issues – which they have and hope to foster in others – and concrete actions to support mitigating climate change beyond the level of individual efforts such as recycling (Norgaard, 2011). Few of our interviewees had a sense of what the role of "Antarctic Ambassador" might encompass beyond encouraging others to travel to Antarctica. Several participants asked our interviewers to define the term for them, as they were unclear on what it meant (our interviewers intentionally offered no direct definitions of the term when asked, instead asking informants to give their perspectives on what the term might mean). Other interviewees offered specifics of what they were already doing in order to see if these qualified as Ambassadorship.

For example, this US man from the 2015–2016 season, in his 70s, rejected the concept of Antarctic Ambassadorship altogether, on the grounds that the term could not apply to someone who was travelling as a tourist:

I mean, am I an ambassador to the other sixty countries or wherever I've been to? I don't think so. You're a tourist touring their culture and their landscape and everything else and an ambassador usually means somebody who is a spokesperson for a subject or an area. Would I speak highly of Antarctica? Yes, I would. Was I impressed by it? Yes. Would I encourage other people to take the journey? Yes. So if that fits your definition, I guess you'd say yes.

Another woman in her 50s, who travelled in the 2015–2016 season, discussed the tensions between seeing tourism as a threat to Antarctica and her own desire to travel there. This is a major tension, as alluded to in the quote above; some tourists wondered whether Ambassadorship was simply about promoting tourism to Antarctica:

Ok I have to be perfectly honest... if it [tourism to Antarctica] ever gets stopped I'm one of the first people that'll be squealing about how much I want to go. And since I've been, I can just go "Oh yeah, nobody else should ever go there, keep it pristine." But I think it depends on who sees it, which also sounds awfully classist. If it's politicians, maybe, they're decision makers, maybe. They're policymakers, maybe they have the power to effect change. I feel quite frustrated that after the trip I, well maybe it's just that I have a lot of friends who think the same way. I don't feel my experience, [that] I've been able to carry it into the real world and change anybody's life or attitudes or outlook towards global warming. So I find that quite frustrating. There is a part of me that wants to go. It's lovely having the tourism, you're exposing thousands of people to an area that they haven't seen before. But it's a little bit like preaching to the converted. It's wonderful and I would never not want to have had that experience, but if I'm thinking with my head and not my heart, while it's marvelous to see the advantage of it, costing a great deal of money is that it... I know with some of the cruise liners, the percentage of your share goes towards some conservation track. ... So that's probably the one advantage of keeping it a destination only for the very wealthy. Which of course is going to then isolate even more

people to think, “Oh ok, well, the only people who can go down there are the very rich, and it doesn’t mean anything to me anyway.” But . . . if influencers go there and they use their influence to effect policy changes at a government level or a global level, I think that’s fantastic. But I do wonder if 5,000 tourists go there, 50,000 tourists go there, I don’t know how much difference that would really make when they go back home, unfortunately.

This concern that larger numbers of tourists would change the “pristine” nature of the continent is not unique to Antarctica. Tourists’ concerns that mass tourism could be detrimental to the continent have also been noted by other researchers (Tin, Bastmeijer, O’Reilly, & Mayer, 2012). Because “Ambassadorship” was often left undefined, and underlying tensions between protection and promotion were not clearly addressed, travellers were left to grapple with these questions.

Few tourists interpreted the idea of “Antarctic Ambassadorship” as taking an overtly political or activist stance. One interviewee, a woman from the 2018–2019 season, engaged in direct action as a result of her Antarctic experience: she participated in 4Ocean, a for-profit, Florida-based business that offers a monthly subscription to assist in removing plastic from oceans. Three other interviewees made public statements about protecting Antarctica: one wrote for a local newspaper, and two gave public presentations to local groups beyond their immediate social circles. While this was a minority of our interviewees, it is significant that some former Antarctic travellers are inspired to engage the public sphere about these issues. We do not believe that the small number of people engaging in such public actions suggests that the promotion of Ambassadorship was not successful. On the contrary, we believe that such actions are meaningful and important.

Ambiguities of Ambassadorship

Most of our tourists claim that they (and those who hear about their travels) have increased “awareness” about environmental issues as a result of their travel to Antarctica. Nevertheless, they were still largely uncertain about how to translate this “awareness” into concrete actions, nor did they agree about whether they were themselves “Antarctic Ambassadors.” We attribute this uncertainty to three intersecting ambiguities, which we will discuss in turn below: (1) the multifaceted definitions of the term “ambassador” itself, (2) a lack of understanding about the complicated political structures that govern Antarctica, including the Antarctic Treaty System (ATS), and (3) the question of what tourists might concretely do to protect Antarctica. In the section that follows, we will propose shifting towards a model that promotes “Antarctic Civics,” which would provide a structure for tourists to take direct action in promoting the conservation of Antarctica.

Defining Ambassadorship

The word “Ambassador” has multiple meanings. It can refer to an official diplomat or government official who legitimately represents a nation-state and is empowered to act on its behalf. It could also refer to a high-profile person supporting or promoting a particular cause, such as a “goodwill ambassador,” sometimes with formal affiliation with an institution (such as the United Nations). It can also refer to someone who touts a particular commercial brand. Travellers to Antarctica are often uncertain which of these meanings is being invoked in their “Ambassadorship” (Alexander et al., 2020, pp. 2–3). In addition, it is not clear on behalf of what body they might be ambassadors nor to whom. Do “Antarctic

Ambassadors” speak for their own nation? Or for the group that travelled with them to Antarctica? Or for tourists in general? And who exactly are they ambassadors *to* – their respective national governments? the tourism industry? potential tourists to the region? their own friends, families, and communities?

It is this uncertainty that causes many of those we interviewed to hesitate in embracing the title of “Ambassadorship,” even when they performed many of the actions that IAATO and others hope that “Antarctic Ambassadors” will undertake. This ambiguity makes defining or assessing “Ambassadorship” difficult, as other scholars have previously shown (Maher, Steel, & McIntosh, 2003). The results tend to be equally ambiguous, as Vila et al., 2016 summarises: “The ambassadorship role played by tourists visiting Antarctica is unclear.” Others argue that while ambassadorship may be understood by travellers, a lack of “straightforward opportunities for tourists to alter and further develop their Antarctic ambassadorship behaviors” is responsible for the term’s loss of meaning shortly after they return home (Powell et al., 2008).

There have been attempts to create clearer definitions for “Antarctic Ambassadorship.” Alexander et al. (2020) is a noteworthy attempt. This team engaged in a Delphi workshop method, involving multiple rounds of written surveys and World Cafes with 42 experts on Antarctic science and tourism (including two authors of this paper). This process resulted in a “working definition” of Antarctic Ambassadorship, with the goal of shifting “from wishful thinking or feel-good tourism to evaluating Antarctic ambassadorship as a means to achieve a specific end” (4):

An Antarctic ambassador is someone [i.e. individual or group] who has a connection to, knowledge of and passion for the Antarctic (as a space, place or idea), who represents and champions Antarctica and its values, and who supports Antarctica through communication and behaviour.

Alexander et al. acknowledge the shortcomings of this working definition, such as a lack of clarity about what “Antarctic values” would be (see also Picard, 2015). But creating a single definition of Antarctic Ambassadorship can never be a matter of empirically describing something “out there.” Instead, it is a political process of *creating* a definition agreed upon within a particular community. In that sense, Alexander et al.’s attempt to create a working definition of “Antarctic Ambassadorship” is a worthy one. They show how difficult it is to do the political work needed to form a definition that can be agreed upon by a particular group (in this case, Antarctica experts).

Alexander et al. (2020) invite others to engage with their working definition – an invitation we are happy to accept. It is important to note that their definition was created by and for experts. In contrast, tourists usually only visit Antarctica once and have a very different relationship with the continent than experts for whom this space is central to their livelihood and professional identities. There is thus a significant divide between the working definition Alexander et al. (2020) have created and the ways that our research participants understood the idea of “Antarctic Ambassador.” While Alexander et al. (2020) give a sense of what experts hope Ambassadorship could become, our research instead shows how this played out on the ground among tourists. These two audiences are dialectically linked – tourists’ experiences of Antarctica are shaped and guided by experts such as expedition staff members. Nevertheless, tourists are worth considering as a separate group.

We agree with Alexander et al.’s (2020) conclusion that Antarctic Ambassadors would ideally take actions beyond mere “advocacy” (2020, p. 7) or, as our interviewees usually put it,

beyond promoting “awareness.” They write: “This would suggest that for tourists who visit the continent, returning home and telling a few friends about what a great trip it was and showing a few photos, may not constitute becoming an Antarctic ambassador” (2020, p. 7). And yet most of the tourists we interviewed talk about exactly these kinds of actions as an important part of their post-travel experiences (whether they labelled this “Ambassadorship” or not).

IAATO’s push for Ambassadorship

The 2013 voyage of the *Akademik Shokalskiy*, with which we began this article (and perhaps in some small way the preliminary reports from this project) motivated IAATO to further promote the concept of Ambassadorship. Members of our team presented our results at the IAATO/AECO (Arctic Expedition Cruise Operators) Field Staff Conference in Iceland in September 2017 and at the IAATO meeting in Rhode Island in May 2018. On both occasions, we made the case that “Antarctic Ambassadorship” was a powerful idea but needed to be better defined for tourists who are being encouraged to enact this role.

IAATO has moved to promote the concept of Ambassadorship in a more directed way. In 2015, IAATO launched an Instagram site and Facebook page dedicated to Ambassadorship and in 2017, held a competition to create a logo for these sites. The winning design, chosen in a blind competition by IAATO members, was drawn by Griffin. This image of four penguins now appears on all IAATO documentation.

In 2021, IAATO offered a new definition of “Antarctic Ambassadorship” approved by its membership. It appears as follows on the IAATO website:

- Loves and respects the region;
- Educates others by sharing their Antarctic experiences;
- Advocates for Antarctica when opportunities arise, and;
- Protects Antarctica by making positive changes at home.

The idea behind the new L.E.A.P acronym is to empower everyone to LEAP into action as ambassadors, using their knowledge and passion in support of Antarctica (IAATO, 2021).

This new definition of Ambassadorship involves two major shifts. First, it explicitly notes that “Ambassadors” need not have travelled to Antarctica. Second, it moves away from two major assumptions that our interviewees had about Ambassadorship – either as speaking for a place or community or as promoting trips to Antarctica. Instead, this new IAATO definition shifts towards what many tourists from Antarctica were actually doing: educating others about Antarctica and sharing their deep love for this place.

The success of this IAATO initiative suggests that those in the tourism industry might further shift into promoting “Antarctic Civics:” a better understanding of how and by whom Antarctica is governed and how tourists’ actions both in Antarctica and at home might ensure its protection. Such a refocusing might help travellers see how to transform “awareness” into concrete actions – whether political, activist, or philanthropic. Part of the work of promoting “Ambassadorship” should be to empower tourists to create impacts beyond their own individual actions.

To that end, we recommend shifting the focus (if not the terminology) away from “Antarctic Ambassadorship” towards “Antarctic Civics,” and offering travellers to Antarctica the *knowledge* they require to enact large-scale change, albeit without specifying the *content* of those actions.

From Ambassadorship to action: promoting “Antarctic civics”

In general, tourists appear to lack a clear understanding of how Antarctica is governed. It is therefore difficult for them to envision how they might enact change with that system. In interviews, this emerged largely through what was unsaid. Interviewees who talked about regulations on the continent did so in vague terms. None talked about institutional actors beyond the ATS. Many ascribed regulations to an undefined “them” or to national actors. The most complete description we heard in these interviews, a clear outlier, was the following statement from a US woman in her mid-60s who travelled during the 2017–2018 season:

Remember nobody owns Antarctica, it’s not owned by anybody, there’s no police station down there, there’s no military, but there’s . . . 53 countries operating 75 research stations. And they’ve all agreed to abide by the Antarctic treaty, which is this treaty that says how you’re supposed to act, you know how to act down there. And I’m going, what if [laughing] if 53 countries including countries like Russia and China that we don’t get along with now, can agree on Antarctica, and how to preserve Antarctica, why can’t we do this in the rest of the world? You know? It doesn’t make any sense to me that the Russians and the Americans can get along down there but we can’t get along in our own countries. So that would be another political position that changed in my mind.

Antarctica is governed by a complicated set of inter- and transnational bodies that are largely unfamiliar to tourists; the scope and regulations of those organisations impose are presented to them through expedition staff. Here we provide only the briefest of overviews of that complexity, in order to illustrate how opaque this might appear to a tourist travelling to Antarctica only once. We believe that travellers should be provided with better information about “Antarctic Civics” in order for them to become “Antarctic Ambassadors” in more meaningful ways.

The two institutions that travellers to Antarctica are most familiar with are IAATO and the ATS. IAATO is an industry-member organisation founded in 1991 by seven tourism companies to “advocate and promote the practice of safe and environmentally responsible private-sector travel to the Antarctic.” Most IAATO members are tour companies that do not wish to alienate customers by subscribing to overtly political positions. IAATO members can, however, help educate travellers about how the continent is governed and by which institutions. By working with expedition staff, IAATO can provide tools to its members such as knowledge, lecture notes, and recordings to assist field staff in providing better explanations about how Antarctica is regulated and managed. Tourists we interviewed were clearly aware such regulations existed and were very positive about them – but were unsure about who designed, implemented, or enforced them. This information could be provided while on tour as well as on IAATO and other webpages that newly formed “Ambassadors” could access after returning home.

The other major actor that tourists are aware of in Antarctica is the ATS, described in detail elsewhere (Gilbert, 2015; Powell et al., 2008). The ATS was signed in 1959 by 12 countries, entered into force in 1961, and currently has 56 signatories and an office in Buenos Aires. The ATS did not resolve territorial claims by nation-states but put previous claims in abeyance. The treaty establishes Antarctica as a place for peaceful purposes and scientific research and regulates activities on the continent, including tourism.

IAATO actively engages in drafting and recommending regulations to conserve and protect Antarctica. While IAATO is regulated by ATS, it also makes recommendations about the

regulation of Antarctic tourism to the ATS, making this a dialectical relationship. IAATO strives to stay ahead of tourist trends. IAATO thus works with the ATS (through the ATCM, the Antarctic Treaty Consultative Meeting) to create regulations and guidelines for the use of tourist sites. For example, IAATO made recommendations to prohibit tourists from the recreational use of drones in 2015, before such equipment came into widespread use, in order to preemptively avoid problems such as crashed drone equipment (e.g. ATCM 2018). The ATS accepted these guidelines and put them into force. There are other examples of such collaboration, such as the regulations governing the use of helicopters (Secretariat of the Antarctic Treaty, 2009, p. 383, 2021, p. 203).

There are other international bodies that also have regulatory authority in Antarctica. Individuals working in national research stations within Antarctica fall under the jurisdiction of the ATS, as well as the national laws of both the station and the individual. Other relevant organisations include the Commission for the Conservation of Antarctic Marine Living Resources, the International Maritime Organization (a UN agency whose Polar Code regulates all ships operating in Arctic and Antarctic waters), the Council of Managers of National Antarctic Programs, and the Polar Tour Guide Association. Few travellers to Antarctica appear to be aware of these organisations.

Ambassadors may have trouble finding information about what is happening in Antarctica once they return home. News about what happens in Antarctica is filtered through local media; Alexander et al. (2022) have masterfully demonstrated the distinct focus of national news sources on Antarctica by comparing news coverage in several countries before and after the COVID-19 pandemic. Their data suggest that news about illegal fishing and other forms of resource mining go largely unreported in national news outlets. An umbrella organisation could be created to compile relevant news into a single webpage or email newsletter aimed at Antarctic Ambassadors. Such a source could offer translations across national news sources, which would offer an international perspective. It could also provide information about research groups, advocacy organisations, and institutions working in Antarctica, such as Happy Whale, Lori Gross's Facebook page "Antarctic Experience," and Greenpeace. The umbrella organisation we envision could also monitor advocacy efforts towards Antarctica to provide a clearinghouse of information about such ongoing efforts and their outcomes.

"Gamification" is another way to promote Ambassadorship. IAATO created bingo cards to encourage tourists to promote ambassadorship once they returned home (IAATO, 2022, 2023). One could envision a gamelike app that allows travellers and others to begin as "Antarctic citizens" and move up the ranks to "Ambassador," earning this designation by documenting their efforts to share information, reduce consumption, and enact political change. For such an app to be successful, it would need to document and reward actions taken on behalf of Antarctic conservation and provide tools to make that possible.

In conclusion, we propose "Antarctic Civics" as both a knowledge base *and* a method of collective action. Tourists returning from Antarctica would not only be "more aware" but empowered with knowledge about who and what regulates, monitors, and makes decisions on the continent. This would help them enact real positive change towards protecting Antarctica.

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