

Has Antarctica tourism taken a hit?

Sinking raises questions about safety, effects of tours

By **BRETT S. DEUTSCH**
Special Contributor

Just after midnight Nov. 23, alarms awoke passengers aboard the M/S Explorer, cruising off Antarctica. It was not a drill.

The ship, featured Oct. 7 in *The Dallas Morning News* Travel section, was taking on water after hitting an iceberg near the South Shetland Islands north of the Antarctic Peninsula. All 154 crew members and passengers abandoned ship and spent the night in lifeboats before another cruise ship rescued them.

The Explorer wasn't so fortunate. It joined countless ships that have sunk in the southern oceans since the 16th century when Sir Francis Drake discovered the passage that separates Antarctica from South America.

The loss of the Explorer has raised questions about the safety and effects of tourism on the icy continent at Earth's southern pole.

The sinking of one of the "best-run vessels with the most experienced crew" is a "cautionary tale" about the safety and environmental impact of Antarctic tourism, says David Bederman, counsel for the Antarctic and Southern Ocean Coalition and a law professor at Emory University.

The Explorer, which had sailed since 1969, was the first passenger ship designed for polar water. It had an ice-strengthened hull, a captain with years of navigating ice and a staff of seasoned Antarctic veterans. Its owner, GAP Adventures, was just named by *National Geographic Adventure* magazine as one of the 10 best adventure travel companies.

The coalition, an Antarctic watchdog, wants Antarctic tourism to be regulated. While it does not support restrictive regulations that would prevent a ship such as the Explorer from taking tourists to Antarctica, it wants to prohibit activities such as construction of airstrips and hotels. The group also is concerned about large cruise ships that sail to Antarctica, including vessels of Holland America Line and Princess Cruises.

With no government of its own, Antarctica is governed by the Antarctic Treaty, signed by 46 nations, including the United States. The Treaty's Protocol on Environmental Protection designates Antarctica as a natural reserve, but it does

not directly regulate Antarctic tourism, which has quadrupled in the past decade to about 30,000 visitors annually.

After the loss of the Explorer, Argentina's environmental minister, Romina Picolotti, announced plans to limit tourism.

But Argentina has already backed off this threat, according to Denise Landau, executive director of the International Association of Antarctic Tour Operators, and Dr. Bederman argues that such restrictions would prove ineffective since Argentina can regulate only ships originating from its port. Unless countries work in concert, ships could reroute from Chilean or other ports, he says.

Dr. Bederman believes many questions about regulating Antarctic tourism will be on the agenda in June at the next Antarctic Treaty Consultative Meeting.

Despite the risks tourism poses to the Antarctic environment, including pollution and disrupting animal life, many environmental groups support ship-based tourism, which has the least impact.

"It would be wonderful if heaps of young people could see Antarctica, how wild and remarkable it is," so that these new "ambassadors" would work to preserve the environment everywhere, says University of Auckland professor Maj De Poorter, a long-time Antarctic environmental advocate and adviser to the World Conservation Union.

Dr. De Poorter credits tourists who visited Antarctic scientific bases with helping to force scientists to clean up notoriously polluted bases, but adds, "It would be sad if [going to Antarctica] was just another tick in the box. If it's not going to be a once-in-a-lifetime experience, it would be better not to go."

Meanwhile, the Antarctic tourism industry will continue regulating itself through the tour operators' organization, a voluntary group with most major Antarctic tour operators as members, GAP Adventures among them.

The group's mission is "to advo-



Photos by BRETT DEUTSCH/Special Contributor

The M/S Explorer travels in the Bransfield Strait in Antarctica. The ship sank last month.

cate, promote and practice safe and environmentally responsible private-sector travel to the Antarctic."

According to Ms. Landau, the group has developed comprehensive regulations, including establishing emergency plans, restricting ships from sending more than

100 people ashore at once, keeping ships and passengers safe distances from wildlife and helping minimize introduction of non-native species.

The operators' group is a voluntary organization with no ability to prevent non-members from operating in Antarctica. Currently, Ms. Landau says, 5 percent of companies

taking tourists to Antarctica are not members.

"[The operators group] has the right idea," says Dr. De Poorter, "but it is not necessarily cautious enough."

Environmentalists such as Dr. Bederman and Dr. De Poorter worry that tour operators are making shortsighted decisions, including carrying high passenger loads and operating outside Antarctica's brief summer when weather is at its best and pack ice at its least.

The 30,000 tourists visiting

the continent in a year might not seem like many. But statistics from the tour operators' group show that about 85 percent of tourists visit Antarctica's top 20 landing sites, all of them on the 800-mile-long Antarctic Peninsula, which has the continent's mildest climate and most diverse wildlife.

Although one long-term study by the National Science Foundation found "tourist activities appeared to have no significant impacts on Adélie penguin populations," and although there are good environmental reasons to land many tourists at a few sites, Dr. De Poorter says there is little consensus on the cumulative impact of tourism.

The sinking of the Explorer probably won't cause serious environmental harm, says James Barnes, ocean coalition executive director. Only "light fuel oil" spilled, he says.

If a veteran ship such as the Explorer could go down, what risks are there for the rest of the Antarctic tourist fleet?

Since 2000, large cruise ships have been visiting Antarctica. Although they carry thousands of passengers, these behemoths stay in open water and aren't permitted landings on the continent.

But the big ships don't have ice-strengthened (often double) hulls. While current operators' group regulations prohibit landfall by ships with 500 or more passengers, Dr. Bederman worries that pressure will grow to bring the ships closer to land and to permit landings.

Although Holland America wouldn't comment for this article,

Princess spokeswoman Julie Benson says Princess follows group regulations and has no plans to make landings in Antarctica.

Ms. Benson says that with four years of "successful visits" to Antarctica and many years of cruising in similar locales such as Alaska's Glacier Bay National Park, Princess has proved it can sail safely and responsibly in Antarctica.

According to Ms. Benson, Princess' goal is to "avoid ice, not cruise into it," so it sails only at the peak of the summer season when ice floes are at a minimum. In addition to the ship's captain, Princess' Antarctic cruises carry an "ice pilot" experienced in Antarctic ice navigation, an extra mariner and an observer from the tour operators' group, she says.

The rescue of the Explorer's passengers "confirmed that emergency plans work," says Ms. Landau, who adds that during high season there's capacity among

available ships to rescue thousands of passengers from a large cruise vessel if need be.

But whether that is true, particularly in bad weather, worries some, including Mr. Barnes, who says that if a large cruise ship sank in Antarctica, there could be "major loss of life as well as serious harm to the environment from its heavy fuel oil."

That concern doesn't seem to be scaring people away, and members of the operators' group are reporting few if any cancellations, says Ms. Landau.

Victor Emmanuel, whose Austin-based nature tour company has led tours to Antarctica for 20 years, says: "Our clients are well-informed travelers who realize this incident was the first in over 40 years of travel to Antarctica and is very unlikely to happen again."

Not even the Explorer's former staff, such as 16-year Antarctic veteran Barbara Jones, is scared off.

The 60-year-old grandmother and small-craft driver, who wasn't working on the Explorer when it sank, said by e-mail: "I will be happy to work [in Antarctica] again. If there had been many lives lost, I would have decided that someone was trying to tell me something and finished my career in Antarctica for the sake of my family. ... But while the rescue was going on, I did wish I was involved. I felt confident I would cope."

Brett Deutsch is a freelance writer in New York.





A curious gentoo penguin

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