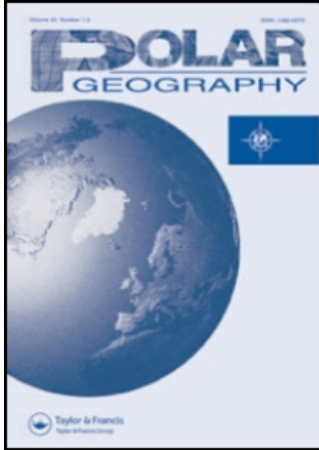


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### Arctic tourism: a complex system of visitors, communities, and environments

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## Arctic tourism: a complex system of visitors, communities, and environments

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This issue of *Polar Geography* represents a collection of research papers compiled as a result of the 2006 Canadian Association of Geographers (CAG) Annual Meeting in Thunder Bay, Ontario (29 May to 3 June 2006). As 2007–2009 is the International Polar Year (IPY), it seemed an appropriate time to examine polar tourism as the complex system of visitors, communities and environments it is. As the organiser of two sessions on polar tourism at the CAG meeting, I felt that it was particularly important to bring together and showcase some recent empirical tourism research conducted in the Polar Regions. Thus, the two special sessions presented at the CAG were somewhat in response to the distinct lack of tourism-related projects officially linked to the IPY (see [www.ipy.org](http://www.ipy.org)). This gap is surprising given the tremendous growth of tourism in the Polar Regions, particularly the Antarctic, and given the focus in previous IPYs on geographical exploration, which has to some degree become a precursor to tourism.

Readers will notice that articles in this special issue only pertain to the Arctic. This is because my own presentation (Maher 2006) was the sole Antarctic contribution, but given that the theme of the CAG meeting was ‘Northern Complexities’, and as it was impossible to blind review my own work, I decided to exclude it from this issue. However, a similar presentation from another conference will be published shortly (Maher 2007), and examples of my other work in the Polar Regions can be seen in Maher *et al.* (2006), and Mullins and Maher (2007).

To further explore the content of this special issue, what is Arctic tourism? One way to look at it is geographically; Arctic tourism is tourism that occurs in the Arctic. Then the follow-up question remains, how does one delineate the Arctic? While there are political boundaries to use (i.e. 60°N, the southern limit of Canada’s three territories, or the Arctic Circle) there are also biophysical boundaries to account for (i.e. the tree line or the July 10°C isotherm). As there is no real consensus amongst countries with territory in the region, it is difficult to come to a comprehensive and inclusive definition of the Arctic. Additionally, many authors and organisations use terms such as the North, the Circumpolar North or Arctic synonymously, which adds to the considerable debate. For example, Nuttall (1998) uses the term Circumpolar North to include both the Arctic and sub-Arctic areas. While there are obvious reasons not to use the relatively arbitrary political boundaries across the Arctic, they do provide administrative, and in some cases statistical ease, for definition. Defining the Arctic then leads to the adjacent areas

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being the sub-Arctic, but each individual researcher or group within a discipline will likely have their own angle for such terms.

Another facet of the discussion is the fact that most definitions are based solely on the terrestrial environment. A marine delineation of the Arctic, such as that used by the Conservation of Arctic Flora and Fauna (CAFF 2001) is immensely useful given that so much of the Arctic is marine dependant and influenced, which “explains why polar bears and tundra are found at 51°N in eastern Canada and agriculture is practiced beyond 69°N in Norway” (Nuttall 2005, p. 121).

Summarising this breadth of information into a single definition is virtually impossible, therefore, for the purposes of this special issue, Arctic will be defined as per the Arctic Human Development Report so that it, “encompasses all of Alaska, Canada north of 60°N together with northern Québec and Labrador, all of Greenland, the Faroe Islands, and Iceland and the northernmost counties of Norway, Sweden and Finland ... [in Russia] the Murmansk Oblast, the Nenets, Yamalo-Nenets, Taimyr, and Chukotka autonomous okrugs, Vorkuta City in the Komi Republic, Norilsk and Igrska in Krasnoyarsky Kray, and those parts of the Sakha Republic whose boundaries lie closest to the Arctic Circle” (AHDR 2004, p. 17–18). This then places two of the papers in this special issue as relating to the sub-Arctic, but a line must be drawn somewhere. If one were to place geographical definitions and thus this ‘invisible’ line aside, we could also refer to the area’s remoteness on how it relates to the Arctic, which is the essence of Hamelin’s (1978) notion of ‘nordicity’. From a tourism perspective, this idea receives attention in sociological debate offered by Grenier (1998, 2004). Placing Churchill, Manitoba outside of the Arctic does not necessarily mesh with the fact that it is much more remote than some areas in Alaska or Scandinavia, which are included by the Arctic Human Development Report.

Regardless of definition, tourism in the Arctic has dated back to at least the 1890s; however, research on tourism is a much more recent phenomenon (see Stewart *et al.* 2005). Since the mid-1990s a number of key texts have been published, which acknowledged the growing interest in tourism across the Arctic, and, in fact, both Polar Regions. The initial three resulted from conferences (see Kempf and Girard 1992; Johnston and Haider 1993; Martin and Tyler 1995). Shortly afterwards, Hall and Johnston (1995) published *Polar Tourism: Tourism in the Arctic and Antarctic Regions*. This text provided the first comprehensive overview of tourism issues across both Polar Regions and addressed issues such as monitoring tourism impacts, the regulation of tourism, patterns of tourism, the impact of tourism on aboriginal peoples, issues of access, and the search for sustainable management regimes. Other contributions followed, including: *Shaping Tomorrow’s North* (Johnston *et al.* 1998); *Wilderness in the Circumpolar North: Searching for Compatibility in Ecological, Traditional and Ecotourism values* (Watson *et al.* 2002); and among the many book chapters those such as the chapter by Stonehouse (2001) in the *Encyclopedia of Ecotourism* and the chapter by Marsh (2000) in *Tourism and National Parks*.

Since the millennium there have been many significant changes in Arctic tourism, some of which crossover to the Antarctic as well. There has been a tremendous diversification amongst the products available, which may be both a positive and negative outcome; tourist numbers are increasing, again a positive for the economy, but perhaps not so for the environment; there has been an increase in local involvement and a growing recognition of the importance of local involvement, very

much a positive change, but one that then leads to a number of capacity issues; and changes in policy and governance, again largely positive, and long overdue.

These changes are in addition to ongoing issues, such as cumulative environmental and social impacts, the provision of education for tourists (creating awareness and thus perhaps ambassadors), increased vessel sizes and growing numbers within the cruise sector, and changing climate patterns that may affect actual travel as well as the industry. Some of these ongoing issues have recently been addressed in three edited books: *Extreme Tourism: Lessons from the World's Cold Water Islands* (Baldacchino 2006); *Tourism in Peripheries* (Müller and Jansson 2006); and *Prospects for Polar Tourism* (Snyder and Stonehouse 2007). Each of these books assists in establishing the study of tourism in the Polar Regions as a genuine and justifiable research area.

Although there are only three papers presented in this special issue, there were approximately 20 audience participants at the two CAG sessions, and an active group of approximately nine academics and graduate students who sought to further the network of polar tourism researchers, with Thunder Bay being the beginning of ongoing collaboration. A designated section of the second CAG session was allocated to facilitate discussions, and as such some key questions arose.

#### *General research issues*

- In terms of research, there are many opportunities, but what should be the priorities?
- While the Polar Regions may be 'high profile' again with renewed interest and political will, will it all dry up at some point?
- How do we address researchers as tourists, or the politics of research as tourism (i.e. the ethical issues of doing research simply to be able to visit an area)?
- How are the issues and questions of importance in the Arctic similar to other non-Polar areas (i.e. Outback Australia)?
- What sort of infrastructure or local partnerships needs to be addressed?
- Is the sense that tourism growth is inevitable correct?
- What are the implications of climate change?

#### *International Polar Year (IPY)*

- What are the issues and opportunities with IPY?
- How do young academics in areas such as tourism get involved in IPY (i.e. those without a network of collaborators, and in a relatively marginalised discipline within the 'traditional' social sciences)?

#### *Communication*

- Amongst both researchers and operators, what is the scope or rather need for networking opportunities?
- Where can they occur?
- When and under what auspices?
- What are the opportunities here, with regards to the IPY?

*Niche sectors*

- Specific to cruise ships, what are the dangers (bigger ships, bigger infrastructure, bigger cultural changes, leakage of \$\$)?
- What is the social impact of cruise ships, and what is the role of participatory research?
- For areas such as parks and protected areas, what are or should be the management goals to provide appropriate programs to protect and enjoy these areas versus destroy them?

Papers within this special issue deal with some of the questions arising from the CAG sessions by presenting methodologies to understand local stakeholder perceptions (see Stewart and Draper); visitor gaze on an iconic Arctic species — the Polar Bear (see Lemelin and Wiersma); and the manner in which we envision polar tourism, using the environment or otherwise, and offering perspective from a well-developed Scandinavian tourism example (see Grenier 1998, 2004). Additionally, three book reviews have been included; two reviews of research-based publications in 2006, the third being of a more popular press publication. Following these is an important conference announcement, where one is sure to find opportunity for networking amongst the growing polar tourism research community.

To conclude this editorial, I would like to express my sincere gratitude to the authors of the papers, as well as all who met in Thunder Bay and helped make this collection a reality for the IPY. The following individuals are gratefully acknowledged for their role as reviewers in providing prompt and anonymous feedback to authors: Suzanne De la Barre, Debra Enzenbacher, Anne Hardy, Greg Ringer, Gordon Titchener, Arvid Viken, and one reviewer who wished to remain anonymous. Together, the presenters and audience at the CAG meeting, and the authors and reviewers of these papers give this special issue an excellent breadth across the Arctic tourism research community. A final thank you goes to Andrew Bond, former managing editor of *Polar Geography*. Without his support and general guidance through the publishing process, this special issue would never have come to fruition.

Given that Arctic tourism is such a complex system of visitors, communities, and environments, I hope you enjoy this special issue, but recognise that it is simply a further entry to the ongoing critical debate that needs to occur.

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