

# **The footprint of polar tourism: tourist behaviour at cultural heritage sites in Antarctica and Svalbard**

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## *Summary*

### **1. Introduction**

This thesis aims to describe and interpret the effects of tourism on historic sites in Antarctica and Svalbard (also known as Spitsbergen), and to assess the implications for management. Explorers, whalers, seal hunters, scientists and others have left many material remains in the Polar Regions that are significant because they tell the history of the exploration and exploitation of these regions. Contemporary polar tourism represents a new phase in this “exploration” and exploitation of the Polar Regions. The potential for the transformation of historic sites has increased following the substantial expansion of polar tourism in recent decades. Key cultural heritage sites are regularly included in standard tourist itineraries and are also the subject of specialized tourism.

In this context, the central research question of this thesis is:

*What are the effects of tourism on polar historic sites, and what are the implications of this for the management of tourism and these historic sites?*

### **2. Conceptual framework**

In this study tourism is examined from the perspective of behavioural archaeology (Schiffer, 2010 and refs.). “Archaeology” may suggest excavating the remains of past cultures. However, behavioural archaeology was conceived as an approach in order to study people-material interactions in all times and places, including aspects of landscape formation processes. Through behaviour, people (tourists) and their artefacts (e.g., boots, walking sticks, and photographic cameras) interact acoustically, chemically, mechanically, thermally, and visually with the external environment (both natural and cultural). The transformations of the environment that result from these interactions can also be regarded as tourism “artefacts”. In management terms, these tourism “artefacts” could be regarded as “impacts”, depending on a value judgement about their significance.

This main conceptual framework is complemented by two theories. The creation of tourism attractions is analysed on the basis of Leiper (1990). The designation of material remains of past activity as “heritage” is discussed by means of Thompson’s Rubbish Theory (1979).

### **3. Research methods**

This thesis examines case studies from either Antarctica or Svalbard, or from both regions. Four field seasons were carried out between 2005 and 2008 in Svalbard (two trips) and Antarctica (two trips). Earlier field work in Antarctica was also included as part of this research. Research methods included site surveys, ethnographic observations, and repeat photography. Complementary research methods were semi-structured interviews; participant observation; the examination of tourist weblogs; and analysis of tourism statistics. The data obtained using the various methods were integrated to produce assessments for the various case studies.

### **4. Main themes**

This research has explored several interconnected themes regarding tourism and historic sites in the Polar Regions, while recognising that there are other relevant themes that have not been addressed here. The themes explored in this thesis are:

**Tourism as behaviour:** Tourism operates in a hierarchy of behavioural scales – from tourism as a whole, to individual visitors. Key processes in these various scales include the recruitment and consolidation of particular sites as tourism destinations; the patterns of behaviour displayed by visitors, both in groups and individually, during shore visits; and discrete interactions between visitors and site features of various kinds. The effects of tourism on historic sites result from interactions at all these levels.

Tourism behaviour consists largely of a basic repertoire of actions that may result in interactions between tourists, their artefacts, and historic sites, and result in the creation of tourism “artefacts”. Visual and acoustic interactions (instructions, narratives) may lead tourists towards (or away from) particular site features. In behavioural terms, a pattern of visitor activity may result in a corresponding “archaeology” of direct and cumulative traces of visitation, which define a tourist activity area superimposed over a historic activity area. These two areas may overlap but are not necessarily the same. Mechanical interactions such as trampling and handling may change the condition and integrity of historic site components and damage the archaeological record on the ground surface and subsurface.

**Tourism as a site formation process, in the context of other (natural and cultural) formation**

**processes:** Polar historic sites are not static but subject to transformation and decay resulting from both cultural and non-cultural (natural) processes. Tourism may contribute to this process. Recent time-serial changes were observed in several case studies of site features. No feature degraded substantially during the monitoring period; rather, several features were restored in different ways. Changes were interpreted as resulting from a range of cultural processes (including conservation, research, and tourism) and natural processes (mainly wind action). Local changes take place in the context of broader regional developments in Antarctica and Svalbard.

**The designation of past activity sites as “cultural heritage sites”:** Assessing whether or not a change to something is an impact relies on a judgement as to the value of what is being impacted. In both Antarctica and Svalbard the criteria and processes used to categorise the sites and remains of past activity (“historic sites”) as “heritage” are defined by law. Designation of past activity sites as heritage has environmental and geopolitical implications.

**The use of cultural heritage as a tourist attraction:** Tourism narratives play a central role in the process of constructing meaning and assigning value to historic remains, which helps to create consumable tourist products and tourism attractions. Information about the sites influences tourist behaviour and therefore the degree of exposure or protection of the sites. Tourism narratives enable the different elements of the tourism attraction system to “click” together into a coherent whole, particularly at sites that because of their original function or present condition reveal little of their history.

**Research methods to study the interaction of tourism with historic sites:** The methods selected for this research allowed the production of a rapid and reasonably informed appraisal of the status, recent changes, tourism modalities, and management needs of the sites investigated. A rapid, low technology approach is appropriate to the Polar Regions, where site visits may be infrequent, opportunistic, and brief. Naturally, more comprehensive assessment methods may be required for different (or more specific) research or management needs

**The management of tourism and historic sites:** Tourism tends to focus on important site features so that it may have a greater impact on elements that have a greater relative value than the rest of a site. Tourism impacts are generally localized within sites, which can be reflected in localised forms of management. Cumulative impacts are potentially a cause of concern. Some dedicated management tools may be required to regulate the movement of people within historic sites; minimal distances from sensitive features; the use of established tracks; and limits in visitor numbers.

## **5. Conclusions**

The tourism “footprint” consists of an assemblage of behavioural traces, which develop on different temporal, spatial, and behavioural scales.

Tourism does not takes place at unchanging sites that are “frozen in time”, but rather at sites that are undergoing decay.

Tourism contributes to this process. Tourism traces may modify traces of previous activities, without necessarily removing them entirely. Tourism has a minor effect on historic sites in relation to that of natural processes, but tends to focus on significant site features that may be vulnerable to visitation.

Tourism impacts may detract from the archaeological value of historic sites. These impacts should be managed despite the ongoing decay of historic sites using, inter alia, dedicated environmental impact assessment and monitoring; qualified guides with enhanced responsibility to enforce regulations; and precautionary action.

## **6. Reference**

Schiffer, M.B. (2010): *Behavioural archaeology: principles and practice*. London: Equinox.