

# Doomsday Tourism: The Last Place on Earth Anyone Should Go

Jenna A. Lamphere, Elizabeth Nyman, & Marissa Palmer  
Texas A&M University, Galveston



## Antarctic Tourism

Antarctic tourism doubled in the past decade to a record-high 104,076 visitors last year, with nearly all activity occurring along a 300-mile shoreline of the Antarctic Peninsula and during the austral summer between November and March.<sup>1</sup> See Fig. 1 for industry growth. Visitation is in part being driven by climate change, which has restructured and energized tourism in areas on the forefront of environmental degradation.<sup>2</sup> Polar regions are experiencing an uptick in what is known as *doomsday tourism*, which refers to increased visitation to destinations with endangered ecosystems, often due to climate change.<sup>3</sup>

In traveling to such fragile locales, doomsday tourists often accelerate ecological decline. The Antarctic tourism season corresponds with peak breeding for many wildlife populations, and although quantification of industry impacts is unknown, scholars have increasingly called attention to wildlife disturbances, degradation from pollutants, destruction of vegetation and soil, and damage from ships to marine environments.<sup>4</sup> Additionally, tourist travel typically doubles personal annual greenhouse gas emissions, and this is to a region that has already warmed nearly 3°C since 1950, which is five times the global average.<sup>5,6,7</sup>

To justify travel, tourism industries have contended that such visitation fosters greater environmental awareness and pro-environmental behavior.<sup>8</sup> The International Association of Antarctica Tourism Operators (IAATO) promotes travel by claiming that tourists return home as *ambassadors* who, with a newfound connection to, knowledge of, and passion for the region, have become committed to defending and advancing Antarctic values.<sup>9</sup> Research on the efficacy of the so-called ambassador effect is limited and mixed, with some scholars finding no supporting evidence and others finding an increase in regional knowledge and pro-environmental behavioral intentions.<sup>9,10</sup>

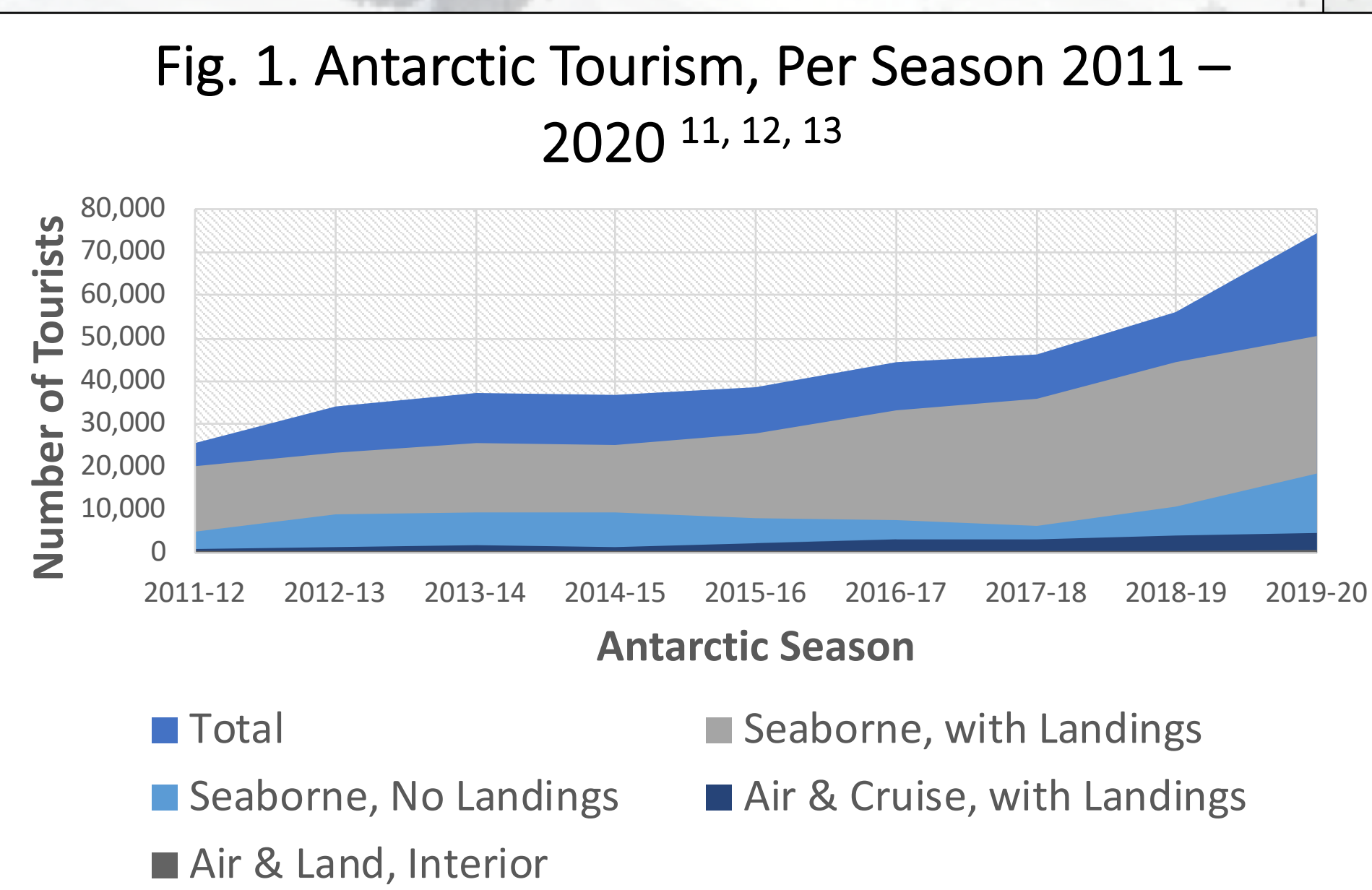
## Methods



In this study, we examined the paradoxical relationship between doomsday tourism and ambassadorship. We conducted a post-cruise survey of passengers onboard a small expedition vessel who traveled with us to Antarctica during the 2022–23 austral summer. The online survey was emailed two months after the cruise to the 44 of 74 passengers who spoke English and agreed to participate in our study. Our response rate was 52%.

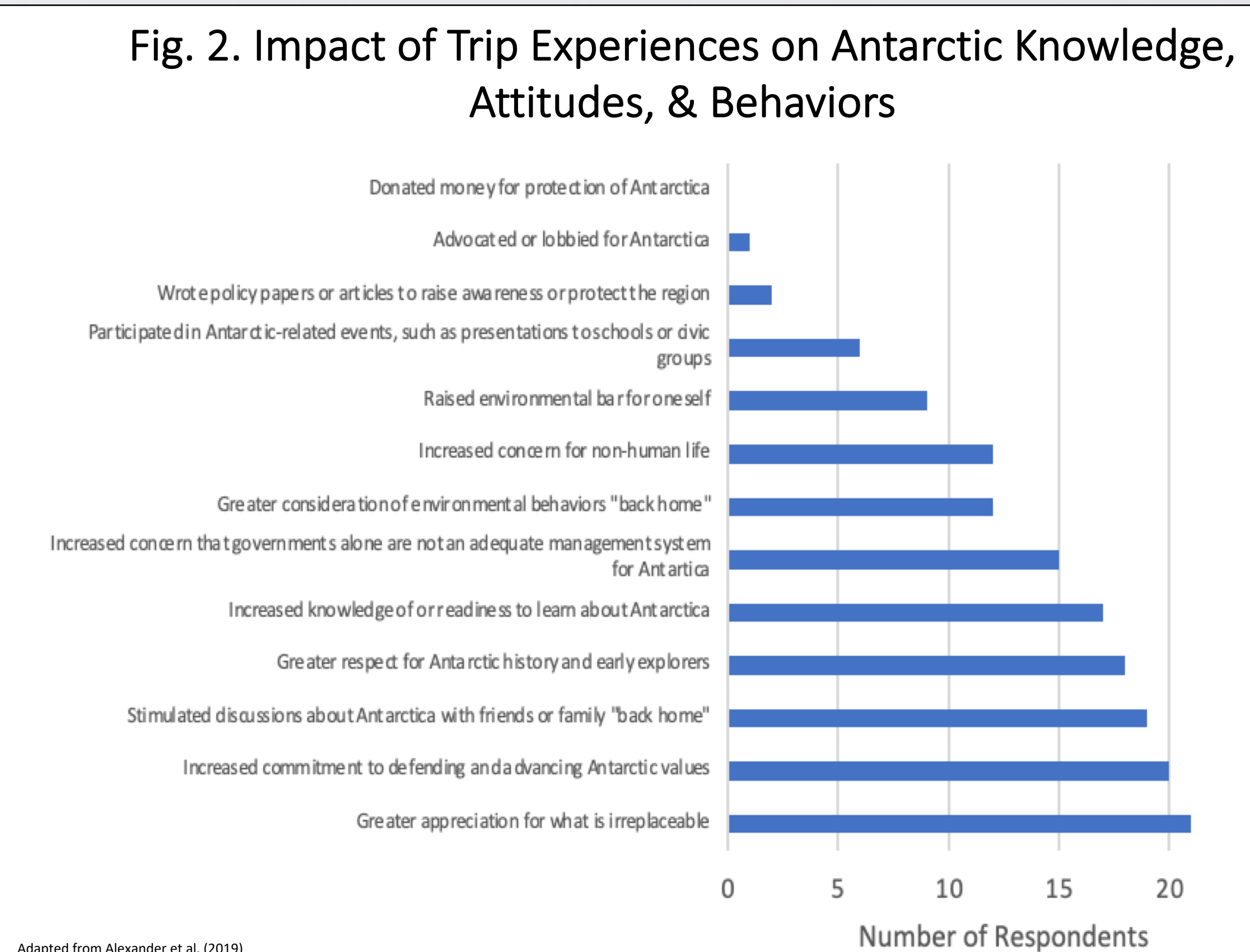
## Acknowledgement

This research was funded by a Texas A&M University Presidential Excellence Fund Triads for Transformation grant.



## Results

When asked about motivations for travel, 100% of respondents stated that “seeing Antarctic landscape and wildlife before they disappear” was important to them, with 75% indicating that it was very important. When asked about post-cruise experiences related to ambassadorship, the greatest impacts were on attitudes and intended behaviors (see Fig. 2). With the exception of stimulated discussion, the lowest impacts were on actual behavior. When provided a definition of ambassadorship and asked outright for their level of agreement with having become one, 75% of respondents either agreed or strongly agreed. When asked if given the chance to return they would, 52% said yes. Of those who said no, none cited environmental impacts as their reason for not desiring to return.



## Conclusion

Our study points to the tension between whether an appreciation for place increases the desire not just to conserve it but also to act to do so. Visitation is overwhelmingly driven by the desire to experience the Antarctic landscape and wildlife before they disappear, yet doomsday tourists fail to recognize how their own travel contributes to its ecological decline. Additionally, while tourists may see themselves as ambassadors, they rarely take meaningful action to protect the region. Future research could include more vigorous testing of the ambassadorship effect, including whether it needs to be “activated” by providing tourists with information on the ecological impacts of their travel, as well as on concrete actions that they could take to help protect the region, perhaps via shipboard lectures, media materials, or other learning opportunities. Future research could also examine if physical experience is necessary for the ambassador effect, or whether deep appreciation of place could be engendered through virtual tourism.

## References

- <sup>1</sup>IAATO (2023). “Visitor Statistics Downloads.” Accessed 23 May 2023 <https://iaato.org/information-resources/data-statistics/visitor-statistics/visitor-statistics-downloads/>.
- <sup>2</sup>Ellegelaar, E., C. Thaper and P. Peeters (2010). “Antarctic cruise tourism: The paradoxes of ambassadorship, last chance tourism” and greenhouse gas emissions.” *Journal of Sustainable Tourism* 18(3): 337-354.
- <sup>3</sup>Shpiman, T. (2007). “Nature’s doomsday tourist boom.” *Daily Telegraph*.
- <sup>4</sup>Trejo, P., J. Benayas, D. Calvo, Y.-F. Leung, D. De Filippo, and D. Liggett (2022). “What are the Real Environmental Impacts of Antarctic Tourism? Unveiling Their Importance through a Comprehensive Meta-Analysis.” *Journal of Environmental Management* 308:114634.
- <sup>5</sup>Amelung, B. and M. Lamers (2009). “Estimating the greenhouse gas emissions from Antarctic tourism.” *Tourism in Marine Environments* 4(2-3): 121-133.
- <sup>6</sup>Yiall, C. M., D. Scott and S. Gossling (2013). “The primacy of climate change for sustainable international tourism.” *Sustainable Development* 21(2): 812-821.
- <sup>7</sup>University Corporation of Atmospheric Research (2023). “Warming in Antarctica.” Accessed 22 November 2023 from <https://www.ucar.edu/hearing-zone/climate-change-impacts/warming-antarctica>.
- <sup>8</sup>Weaver, D. B. (2003). “Comprehensive and minimalist dimensions of ecotourism.” *Annals of Tourism Research* 30(2): 439-455.
- <sup>9</sup>Alexander, A., A. D. Liggett, E. Luoma, M. E. F. Nielsen, J. L. Bailey, M. J. Brainer, and M. Howard (2019). “What and Who is an Antarctic Ambassador?” *Polar Record* 55:497-506.
- <sup>10</sup>Powell, R. B., S. R. Kellert, and S. H. Hamm (2008). “Antarctic Tourism: Ambassadors or Consumers?” *Polar Record* 44:333-341.
- <sup>11</sup>IAATO (2019). “Tourism in Antarctica, 2019.” Accessed 6 June 2023 <https://iaato.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/Tourism-in-Antarctica-2019.pdf>.
- <sup>12</sup>IAATO (2020). “Fact Sheet 2007-18.” Accessed 23 May 2023 <https://iaato.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/IAATO-Fact-Sheet-2007-18.pdf>.
- <sup>13</sup>IAATO (2020). “IAATO Antarctic Visitor Figures 2019-2020.” Accessed 23 March 2023 <https://iaato.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/IAATO-on-Antarctic-visitor-figures-2019-20-FINAL.pdf>.

