A Rude Awakening

BANG!... In the middle of a still November night in 2007, the cruise ship M/S Explorer was crunching through ice near Antarctica when suddenly it struck an iceberg (Figure 5.5). Water began pouring from toilets, alarms wailed, and terrified passengers raced from their cabins.

All 154 people on board scrambled into lifeboats and escaped from the ship. Near dawn, the shivering travellers were pulled to safety by two cruise ships sailing nearby.

These tourists were incredibly lucky. Antarctica is a remote, frozen wilderness with no cities, hospitals, or rescuers—just 45 scattered research stations. Fortunately, on that night, waters were calm and assistance was just 64 km away.
The M/S Explorer sank later that day, the first tourist ship to be lost in these waters. Its sinking raised an important question: how should Antarctic tourism be controlled?

THE GREAT WHITE CONTINENT

Antarctica is the coldest, windiest, and driest continent on Earth. It’s enormous, too—one and a half times the size of the United States. A vast sheet of ice, miles thick, covers 98 percent of the land and holds 70 percent of Earth’s fresh water. Yet Antarctica is a desert. In fact, it’s one of the world’s largest deserts. Antarctica gets only 20 cm of precipitation a year because its frigid air is too cold to hold water vapour. Only plants such as lichens and moss, small insects and worms, and breeding birds and seals are adapted to this icy land.

On the other hand, many species thrive in the mild climate of the Antarctic Peninsula, which stretches about 1900 km toward South America. This peninsula, a strip of land jutting out from the mainland, and nearby islands support more species. The surrounding food-rich oceans teem with whales, seals, penguins (Figure 5.6), and flying sea birds well-suited to the frigid temperatures. Many of these species have layers of insulating fat, and oily feathers waterproof the penguins. Most fish even have an antifreeze-like substance in their bodies.

Antarctica might seem like an icy wasteland, but it helps control the global climate and holds many keys to understanding climate change. It is also Earth’s last great wilderness.
THE TOURIST BOOM

Antarctic tourism took off in 1969 when explorer Lars-Eric Lindblad launched an expedition ship built for icy seas. Soon, small ships that had been strengthened to withstand ice shared the waters with private yachts, tall ships with canvas sails, and cruise ships. One of these floating cities carried 3800 people, presenting a potential rescue nightmare. In 2012, about 34 000 people sailed to Antarctica in 35 vessels, while smaller numbers arrived by air.

Most travellers converge on the Antarctic Peninsula, the popular tourist destination of the continent. They arrive during the Antarctic summer when seals and large colonies of penguins and sea birds raise their young onshore (Figure 5.7).

Since the Explorer disaster in 2007, accidents have become common. From 2008 to 2011, ships struck rocks or ran aground every year. Many ships burn cheap, heavy fuel that pollutes the air and adds to global warming. All harm the habitat.

THE HUMAN IMPACT

Growing numbers of tourists who come ashore on small boats—even helicopters—have increased the concern for wildlife. Biologist Steve Forrest, who worked on an island near the peninsula, said, “Some days we may see 600 people here.” One British traveller observed tourists climbing into penguin colonies (see Figure 5.6 on the previous page), and even chasing penguins to get the perfect photo. Researchers are still learning whether such pressure disrupts colonies of breeding birds and seals. Other tourists have trampled delicate moss beds, which take a century to grow a few inches.

Scientists also worry about invasive species, which are non-native species that can take hold in a habitat and wipe out local plants and animals. Already, spiders, seeds, fruit flies, and human bacteria have hitchhiked here on boots, jackets, and backpacks. Global warming has increased temperatures in Antarctica, and many fear that invasive species, once kept out by the bitter cold, could begin thriving here.

WHO’S IN CHARGE?

Today, no one owns Antarctica, so no government enforces rules. Instead, the Antarctic Treaty, signed by 50 countries, protects Antarctica as “a natural reserve devoted to peace and science.” Member countries solve legal problems themselves, and tourists obey the laws of their own countries.

To help protect the environment, the International Association of Antarctica Tour Operators (IAATO) developed strict conservation guidelines for its members. Tourists and guides must inspect their gear for invasive species and disinfect their boots before going ashore. Tourists who watch wildlife must keep their distance, be quiet, and respect nests and young wildlife. Recently, the Antarctic Treaty ruled that ships with 500-plus people cannot land in Antarctica. Smaller ships may visit a site one at a time but must limit landings to groups of 100. Guides must supervise every 20 people.
DO THE RULES WORK?

So far, self-regulation has prevented a catastrophe, but many worries linger. Not all tour companies belong to IAATO, and many yacht owners aren’t aware of the rules.

Despite the rise in tourism, conservation work continues. In 2011, a United Nations (UN) agency banned cruise ships from using heavy fuel, a dangerous pollutant if spilled. As a result, three megaships cancelled tours for 2011 and 2012, reducing tourist numbers by 9000. The same UN agency hoped to release a Polar Code governing all tourism in 2012.

The Polar Code cannot go into effect soon enough. Already, adventure travellers come here to ski, snowboard, mountain climb, scuba, and kayak, and others ride motorbikes and skydive. Runners compete in marathons near the South Pole. “Antarctica is like this giant world park,” notes biologist Steve Forrest. “And we don’t have any park rangers.”