

**Presentation at the
“Linking Tourism and Conservation in the Arctic”– Workshop,
February 2001**

*By **Maureen Bundgaard**
Supervisor, Tourism and Parks,
Government of the Northwest Territory*

Those of us who have been dealing with cruise ships in the eastern Arctic have been watching with interest the various issues involved with the Alaskan cruise ship business. While our situation is different from Alaska's, we nevertheless have some serious concerns, and we would do well to think about potential problems before they reach a level that they are difficult or near-impossible to deal with.

Both Northwest Territories and Nunavut receive cruise ships, however, most of my examples will come from the eastern Arctic since the marine traffic there is much more significant (more ships, more community visits, more coastline).

Characteristics of the cruise ship business in the Eastern Arctic (compared to Alaska)

- Ships are almost invariably much smaller than those which travel the Alaska coast. They are more properly termed expedition cruises rather than cruise-ships and have a capacity of about 60 to 160. A few have significantly more.
- Canadian Arctic communities are small (100 – 1500) and often very traditional. Many/most of the residents are unilingual (Inuktitut) and Tourism infrastructure is often minimal. Many are subsistence hunters.
- Nationalities of most visitors are: Canadian, American, German, and other European – although small numbers come from all over the world.
- The major interests of the passengers are (predictably) natural history, Arctic culture and various aspects of polar history.

Issues surrounding cruise ship arrivals

Pros

- Participating in an expedition cruise to the Arctic requires a significant commitment on the part of most passengers. Trips on those vessels which might be termed “luxury” are very expensive while passage on the more modest converted icebreakers are comfortable but certainly not “luxury”. The majority of passengers are, if you could term them that, “quality tourists”. They are concerned about the environment, the local culture and many take the trouble to inform themselves about the area before coming.
- Problems related to, for example, interaction between the local residents and visitors or cultural misunderstandings tend to be much more often through ignorance than through intention or lack of concern.
- Virtually all of Nunavut and a great deal of NWT have a very under-developed economy except for various levels of government jobs; government transfer payments and a few local service businesses which just tend to circulate government funds already in the community. Nunavut communities are far from suppliers and markets and rely on air freight or the annual sealift for shipping. There are no trees for construction; there are no roads; the cost of doing business is generally very high; and there is a lot of economic leakage.
- Tourism therefore offers one of very few options for these communities to generate any “new money”. Tourism is not only “tempting” it really needs to be considered seriously. The Canadian Arctic is, for most travellers, an exotic destination and there are actually more people who want to visit than our infrastructure, expertise, and services can presently accommodate.
- Servicing cruise ship passengers overcomes the problem of limited accommodations and meal service in remote areas. These are day visitors, often with the means to spend significantly in the community if products and services are available. So under the best conditions,

tourism revenues may be enjoyed while actually only having to host the visitors for a few hours at a time.

- One of the really positive aspects of *responsible* tourism is that it provides an economic incentive for the conservation and protection of both natural and cultural resources. When community residents have few revenue sources they may sometimes be lured into short-term gain over more responsible behaviour. [Example of Igloolik.]

Cons (more problematic factors)

- Because of the nature of eastern Arctic communities (small, isolated, traditional) even the arrival of a hundred strangers walking around the streets can be unsettling and upsetting if not handled well.
- Only a few communities have people who are used to dealing with cruise ship visitors and/or have someone designated to do so. With a lack of communication there is also a lack of control regarding who arrives when and what they do in and around the community. Sometimes arrivals come as a complete surprise to residents. One of the comments I have made at cruise ship workshops in Nunavut is that “if you don’t take control of what happens in the community, the ships personnel will – because someone has to be in charge.”
- Infrastructure, sales outlets, services are often very scant, making it difficult for many communities to realize the potential revenues such arrivals could offer. In some instances, where communities have tried to provide services and activities they actually spent more money than they have earned – mainly because they did not look at the experience as “business”.
- The Arctic environment is very sensitive. There are areas which require special permission to enter (for example, because of their marine

mammal populations) and our regular visitors do follow that process. On the other hand, as these areas are often remote from communities there is no real effective way to police compliance. In other words enforcement is a serious problem. (This is a concern for all aspects of tourism – for example arrivals on Axel Heiberg Island with its 40-million year old forests.)

- Community residents often have concerns about culturally/ archaeologically sensitive areas as well. There are places they simply do not want cruise ships to go at all. ***At the present time***, the means of preventing them from doing so are limited.
- Charging fees to land in certain areas is only a partial solution. It doesn't deal with the problem of not wanting ships to land their passengers at all at certain spots, and at present landing fees for simply setting foot in a community with no services provided may not be the most desirable way of benefiting from cruise ship business.
- The arrival of (albeit few) much larger vessels (e.g. more than 400 passengers) has alarmed residents that our cruise ships might keep getting larger and larger. In addition there seem to be more cruise expeditions every year which make people wonder where it will all end.
- The Canadian Arctic is a vast and sparsely populated land. This leads visitors and new immigrants to presume that this is the last frontier where "anything goes" they don't have to live by the rules. In fact, considerable areas are private lands under the Nunavut Land Claims Agreement even though there are no fences marking them off. Additionally, the delicate Arctic environment deserves to be protected by regulation as much or more than the rest of the country does.

Problems in dealing with the issues

- A brand-new bureaucracy has been formed in Nunavut and that (as in any part of the world) takes a while to get up and running efficiently.
- The land claims agreement which governs development and land use in Nunavut theoretically provides a number of checks and balances which could be put to good use. However, agencies such as the Nunavut Impact Review Board have yet to learn how to deal with many of the issues surrounding tourism and how to evaluate proposals, licence applications and so on. Tourism proposals need to be dealt with differently than mining or oil and gas exploration proposals.
- Politics is often involved in proposal review in the Arctic but decisions and politics can often be more related to self-interests and factional rivalries, or political posturing than to making sound environmental and economic decisions.
- Many northern residents want to be in control of their destiny (which of course they should be) but on the other hand do not have a lot of experience in development and social issues which other parts of the world have already faced or are currently facing. Neither are they, at this point, willing to “take a lot of advice” from other more established areas. In any case, the vast difference between say, Nunavut destinations and well-established destinations such as Hawaii, the Caribbean or even Alaska, usually make facile extrapolations inappropriate.
- There is outside market pressure to come to the Arctic. While not every tourism operator has all the clients he/she wants, there are still large numbers of potential visitors who are “demanding” to come. Some cruise ship companies tell me their Nunavut cruises are their most popular offerings.

What steps we have been taking

- Encouraging communities to be pro-active with cruise ship companies: open communication early, find ways to benefit from the arrivals not just be on the “giving end”.
- Encouraging communities to put restrictions on ship arrivals where appropriate: don’t land your passengers before 9:00 a.m.; these activities are acceptable while these are not. If a community really does not want to deal with cruise ships they should make that known too.
- Providing programming which not only offers revenues, but also allows better control over where people go, what they do, and generally keeps them out of trouble (e.g. looking through people’s windows, taking inappropriate photographs and so on). It also makes the visitors’ experience more enjoyable because programming activities allow them to meet and talk to local people and learn something about the culture through appropriate venues.

What steps we need to look at in the future

- Government and regulatory agencies need to be much more organized and better resourced to deal with regulations respecting cruise ships, sensitive areas, off-limit areas, and so on. Environmentally and culturally important areas need to be more thoroughly identified with restricted access. (Both Transport Canada and the Coast Guard, federal agencies, have responsibilities regarding passage through Arctic waters.)
- Communities have to improve their “taking charge” of the situation. They don’t have to accept whatever a cruise director wants to do. Often a positive spin can be put on these negotiations by not only saying “No, I don’t think that would be appropriate” but “I think I have a better suggestion”.

- Communication with cruise ship companies needs to improve. There should be no “unexpected” arrivals. Discussion of problem areas, community do’s and don’ts etc. are of benefit to both the community and the tour organizers if we presume that tour people *want* their clients to have a good time and continue to feel welcome.
- Fee payment structures need to be developed in areas where this serves as an effective measure for visitor control or where revenues will be turned back into environmental protection/rehabilitation.
- Encouraging the cruise ship companies to have an appropriate Nunavut representative travel aboard the ship while in Nunavut waters might be desirable for a number of reasons: monitoring, doing interpretation, providing presentations, whatever.
- Perhaps some regions should remain “exclusive” destinations – and not be for “everybody”.