

# How tourism affects the environment of polar regions tourism essay



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The Polar Regions are the icy areas around the North and South Poles. The Northern Polar Region is called the Arctic, while the Southern Polar Region is called the Antarctic (<http://42explore.com>). They are among the world's coldest places which contain a majority of the world's ice and snow. During the summer when the temperature increases, the ice melts, an immense population of wildlife arrive and daylight lasts practically all day. In the Arctic, a profusion of plants bloom. These extreme features may not be the world's most popular tourist attractions, but a growing number of visitors are touring and recreating in the Polar Region environments (Synder, 2007).

The Southern Polar Region of Antarctica is the least visited continent in the world. Until about 1820, no human had seen it and it is doubtful as to whether anyone landed on it before 1894 or spent a winter ashore prior to 1899. During the 1990's, the number of voyages increased as tour operators responded to a growing demand for Antarctic tourism[1]. These days however, parts of the continent and several of its offshore islands provide the setting for scientific studies and some of the world's most sought after tourism experiences. From mid-November to early March, during the time when ice conditions are less severe, the region is visited regularly by tourists aboard cruise vessels (Bauer, 2001). Commercial cruise lines currently bring the highest number of tourists to Antarctica, and many have the Antarctic Peninsula area and its islands as their destination (Enzenbacher, 1991).

Unlike the Antarctic, the Arctic has been attracting tourists since the 1800's. The earliest Arctic tourists were individual anglers, hunters, mountaineers, and adventurers who were attracted to abundant fisheries, exotic wildlife species, and remote regions. Mass tourism in the Arctic Region has been <https://assignbuster.com/how-tourism-affects-the-environment-of-polar-regions-tourism-essay/>

thriving since the mid 1800's when steamships and railroads aggressively expanded their transportation networks providing access to numerous destinations throughout the Arctic. Tourism entrepreneurs such as Thomas Cook formed partnerships with railroad and steamship companies and thereby pioneered the popular tourism industry. Numerous advances in transport technologies have also contributed to the steady growth of the Arctic Region's tourism. At present, advanced steamship technologies together with improved marine charts and navigational aids have allowed cruise ship travel to increase exponentially. Additionally, diesel locomotives, four wheel drives and tracked vehicles further opened access to vast regions of the Arctic. Most importantly however, air transport in all of its forms, provides speedy travel to the Arctic Region. Collectively, these improved transport technologies not only added numbers of tourists, but also expanded the seasonal and geographical research of Arctic tourism (Snyder, 2007).

The growth of tourism in the Polar Regions presents both challenges and opportunities. Although this type of tourism may not be the world's most popular, it is one of the fastest growing areas of tourism today. This has led to concerns about the possible negative impact on the environment. In the Arctic, tourist numbers have grown from about one million in the early 1990's to more than one and a half million today. In Antarctica, the number of ship-borne tourists increased by an astounding four hundred thirty per cent in the last fourteen years and the number of land-based tourists increased by an amazing seven hundred fifty seven per cent in the last ten years (UNEP, 2007).

This level of tourism negatively affects the environment in many ways.

Firstly, there is an increase in the level of soil erosion and contamination. For many visitors, a trip to the Polar Region may be a once in a lifetime experience. As such, many visitors would wish to see areas of great beauty or lushness such as bird colonies, marine mammals and caribou aggregations, many sights which would have previously only been seen in some form of visual media. There are rather few places where such sights are both accessible and reliable. Because of this tourist traffic to these areas is often high. Vegetation in the Arctic is typically unable to withstand such a high amount of human traffic, and paths that have been repeatedly trampled are now showing bare ground in some heavily visited areas.

Secondly, garbage waste is left behind. With so many visitors to the Polar Regions each year, it is inevitable that there will be large amounts of garbage waste. However, because of climatic conditions, garbage waste decomposition is very slow and if left behind is visible on the bright white permafrost ([www.coolantarctica.com](http://www.coolantarctica.com)). Sewage from cruise ships is also discharged into the sea. This causes harm to local species of fish and other sea creatures.

Due to the increase in tourism, some Polar Region species are on the verge of extinction. Some forms of air transportation such as helicopters which are used for recreation purposes are very noisy. They produce noises that are foreign to the Polar Region sea birds which they find distressing and disturbing. This distress and disturbance causes panic flights and can lead to egg loss particularly in birds (Snyder, 2007).

With an increase in visitors and the volume of ships comes an increase in the risk of oil spills in the Polar Region. Any oil that is spilled will be extremely difficult (if not impossible) to clean up. It may contaminate the wildlife's habitats and food sources. This will put strain on the wildlife that live there, as they are not accustomed to dealing with man-made interruptions in their daily way of life.

The introduction of bird and plant diseases in the Polar Regions is another impact on the environment (Kriwoken & Rootes, 2000). Because there are so many visitors coming from different parts of the world, there is a very likely possibility that some kind of plant or animal disease may be brought into the Region[2]. For example, a tourist may decide to sneak a plant in on one for their trips on land. Perhaps they would have unknowingly brought an infected plant for the purpose of trying to grow it in extreme cold conditions. If the plant is infected, then there is a possibility that it will infect other flora in the area.

Other environmental impacts include air pollution from the various forms of air transportation and the unlawful collection of Region species as souvenirs (Kriwoken & Rootes, 2000).

Like anything else in life, if negative impacts are not controlled they can have lasting effects. An increase of tourism to the Polar Regions leads to an increase in environmental impacts. Should these impacts go untreated, long term effects could be dire. In the long run, soil erosion and contamination may lead to the complete removal of what little vegetation there is in the

Polar Regions. Because of repeated trampling, vegetation will cease to grow. This will affect the natural beauty of the Regions.

A constant build-up of garbage waste that is left on land by visitors and ship operators that does not decompose quickly will become unsightly on the bright white permafrost. Garbage waste, even in some of the most remote areas of the Regions, can cause disturbance not only to the beauty of the area but also to the wildlife's natural habitats. The waste may even cause diseases which local species may contract and this may lead to an increase in the death toll. If the Region's local species die at an increased rate (because of diseases caused by garbage waste as well as the introduction of bird and plant diseases), then the chances of a particular species becoming extinct is much greater.

Although there has not been any major oil spills in the Arctic or Antarctic Regions as yet, because of the increased amount of travel there by ship, there is an increased possibility that there will be one day. Imagine if for whatever reason oil spills became an almost regular occurrence. Again, an oil spill that is difficult to clean up in an area covered by bright white permafrost will most definitely leave unsightly marks in a place of such natural beauty. Not only that, but it will also contaminate the habitats and food sources of wildlife for years to come, putting the natural food chain in disarray. Without being able to find food in their area, wildlife will be forced to migrate to other parts to find food or eventually die out.

For many areas of the Polar Region, tourism is of great economic importance. Arctic economies rely on tourism for sales revenue, jobs,

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personal income, and public finance revenues. Tourism development is a goal for areas such as Greenland, Nunavut, Manitoba and Native Alaskan economies (Snyder, 2008). However, with increasing visitor numbers and increasing environmental impacts, the overall industry will be affected. Should current environmental impacts continue and worsen, then Polar tourism will cease to exist. Interestingly enough though, it was revealed in a study conducted by Dr. John Snyder, that tourists perceived there to be no threat in the Arctic, climate change publicity is free advertising and they want to see the Arctic and its wildlife before it is "lost". Thankfully, organisations such as the International Maritime Organisation (IMO) and the International Association of Antarctic Tour Operators (IAATO) have put in place strict guidelines to its member tour operators and ships. Such guidelines limit the size of ships that can cruise Antarctic waters and also how many people can be landed at sites around Antarctica. So far the IAATO is perceived as being successful in its aims and its Regulation protection for Antarctic protection ([www.coolantarctica.com](http://www.coolantarctica.com)).

The North and South Arctic and Antarctic Polar Regions are some of the coldest places on earth, but also the most pristine. Visitor numbers have been increasing at a fast rate. However, such an increase brings with it increases in environmental impacts. These include soil erosion and contamination, the introduction of bird and plant diseases, an increased risk of oil spills, Polar Region species becoming on the verge of extinction and unsightly garbage waste being left behind by visitors. Long term effects could be dire, and if not properly regulated may see Polar Region tourism ceasing to exist.