



Foreign, Commonwealth
& Development Office

Stephen Doughty MP

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Mr Toby Perkins MP
Chair, Environmental Audit Committee
House of Commons
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17 January 2025

Dear Toby,

Thank you for your letter of 18 December 2024 following the Environmental Audit Committee's evidence session on 11 December. I was pleased to give evidence before your Committee and greatly appreciate the interest shown by Members in Antarctic issues.

As you mention in your letter, Antarctic tourism is growing in popularity as the continent becomes more accessible and attractive as a destination. While the UK supports safe, responsible and sustainable tourism in the Antarctic that enables visitors to experience the uniqueness of the region, we must also ensure the fragile environment is protected for future generations.

The UK is a leading advocate for the development of a comprehensive tourism framework that takes a precautionary approach to managing tourism to limit environmental damage and protect the values of the Antarctic Treaty and its Protocol on Environmental Protection. Our priorities for the framework are to ensure that Antarctic tourism remains safe, responsible and sustainable into the future. We want to see a framework that is robust at managing growth and an expanding array of activities, but one that also has the flexibility to respond to future needs as the industry grows.

Negotiations at the ATCM in June 2025 will focus on managing growth and diversification and the question of balancing tourism and environmental protections will be central to discussions. The UK has already been actively participating in ongoing intersessional work on these topics, engaging with ATCM Parties on how to build on existing environmental protection requirements into a framework that both supports tourism, but also mitigates any adverse impacts. Our priority is to listen to what UK tourism stakeholders want and need from Treaty Parties, as regulators, to operate safely and responsibly into the future, to deliver tourism that supports the objectives and values of the Antarctic Treaty system. The FCDO held a workshop with stakeholders including industry representatives, the British Antarctic Survey, and academics, to discuss elements of the framework and help inform our approach to its development. A second workshop will be held in April to further refine our priorities for the negotiations at the ATCM in June.

The Antarctic Treaty system contains a range of mechanisms for managing tourism. The Environmental Protocol, and agreed Measures and Resolutions, place obligations and responsibilities on tourist operators, including to minimise their potential environmental impact. Tour operators must have a permit and authorisation for activity in Antarctica from the relevant national competent authority. The FCDO manages the UK's permitting regime and applications are assessed to ensure that the highest safety and environmental protection standards are maintained. All applicants must produce an environmental impact assessment showing that any activity would have no more than a minor or transitory impact on the Antarctic environment before being authorised. Following expeditions, permit holders are required to submit a Post Visit Report, which is reviewed to determine compliance with permit conditions, including environmental conditions.

Most tourism operators are members of the International Association of Antarctica Tour Operators (IAATO) and the UK recommends that visitors to Antarctica travel with an IAATO member given the body's role in advocating for safe and environmentally responsible tourism. IAATO has banned activities such as recreational drone use and the UK does not permit recreational helicopter flights. Through these efforts, the UK seeks to ensure that the environmental impact of UK operators on Antarctica is kept to a minimum.

The UK has regular discussions with other national competent authorities on approaches to permitting activity in Antarctica and there are regular discussions to share best practice at the ATCM. The UK will continue to advocate for a precautionary approach to managing tourism to prevent environmental damage. When managed responsibly, tourism can be a force for good and aid collective understanding of why the future of Antarctica matters to everyone.

Thank you again for the opportunity to discuss Antarctic issues with Members and I look forward to the Committee's report in due course.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in brown ink that reads "Stephen Doughty". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Stephen Doughty MP
Minister of State for Europe, North America and UK Overseas Territories