

# Antarctic nations consider new controls on ships

By RAY LILLEY, Associated Press Writer

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WELLINGTON, New Zealand – Countries that manage Antarctica are considering new controls on ships visiting the frozen continent to reduce the growing threat of human and environmental disasters posed by exploding numbers of tourists, an official said Wednesday.

A proposal for a code to ensure ships plying the world's southernmost seas could withstand hitting an iceberg and other measures are being discussed at a meeting this week in New Zealand of more than 80 experts from signatories to the Antarctic Treaty, the international accord to oversee the region.



Antarctica's pristine environment, unpredictable and extreme weather, mostly uncharted waters and vast distances from habitation pose major dangers for vessels and major problems for rescuers in any emergency.

In the past, most shipping in Antarctica has been limited to scientific vessels bringing researchers or supplies. But traffic has burgeoned in recent years as tourists flock to see the world's last great wilderness.

Annual tourist numbers have grown from about 10,000 a decade ago to 45,000 last year. Tourists can pay between \$3,000 and \$24,000 for a two-week trip, in style ranging from basic to all-out luxury.

Existing rules bar tourists or tour operators from leaving anything behind — like garbage or human waste — and protect animal breeding grounds.

But there are no formal codes on the kind of vessels that can use the waters or the kinds of fuel and other chemicals that they can carry.

In a recent scare, the Canadian cruise ship Explorer hit an iceberg and sank in November 2007. All 154 people aboard were saved by a nearby Norwegian vessel during a window of good weather, but light fuel oil continues to leak into surrounding waters from the Explorer's sunken hull.

Four other passenger ships have run aground in Antarctica in the past three years.

Trevor Hughes, the head of Antarctic policy at New Zealand's foreign ministry, said the sinking of the ice-strengthened Explorer was a wake-up call to Antarctic Treaty nations, and experts from all key members of the Antarctic Treaty now want a tough new code for shipping in Antarctica.

"Without regulations, we are going to have a disaster where a lot of lives are lost and where oil spills out into the environment, and we see penguins being smothered and poisoned by fuel oil in their rookeries," Hughes told The Associated Press.

The proposed code, which must be ratified by treaty states to become binding, would cover vessel design and construction for polar operations, equipment and crew training. In a similar move, the U.N. International Maritime Organization recently approved guidelines for ships in polar waters.

New Zealand is one of the dozen founding members of the Antarctic Treaty, along with the United States, Russia, Britain and others, and is among those leading the push for shipping regulation.

Steve Wellmeier, executive director of the International Association of Antarctica Tour Operators, said the group supports new mandatory controls.

"We welcome consistency and oversight of all vessels, including passenger vessels," he said.

New Zealand and Norway are also pushing for a ban on carriage or use of heavy fuel oils in the Antarctic region, which is due to be ratified in 2010.

"Heavy fuel oils in the Antarctic Treaty area pose the greatest threat of long-term environmental damage," said Catherine Taylor, director of Maritime New Zealand, the agency responsible for fighting oil spills in the country's Antarctic zone.

The results of this week's conference will be presented at the Antarctic Treaty states' meeting in Uruguay in May.