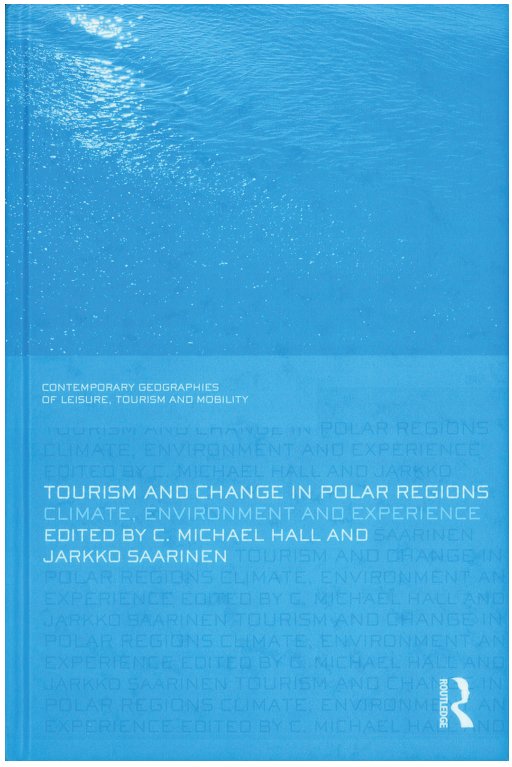
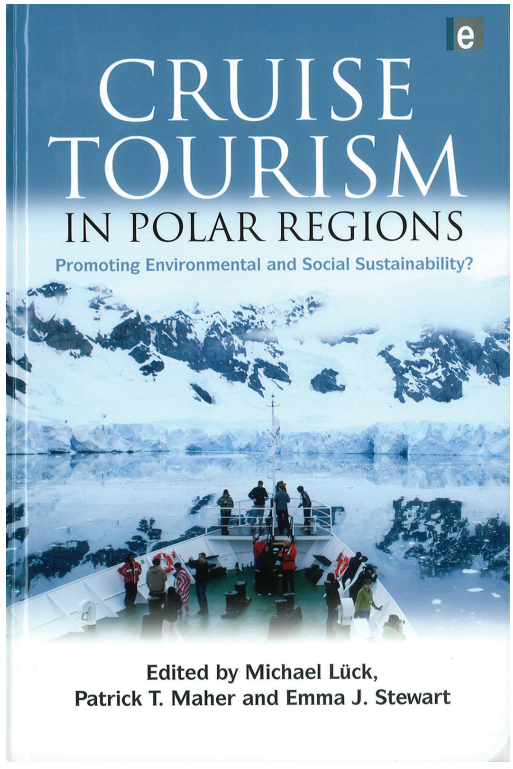
Polar Research

BOOK REVIEW

Review of *Tourism and change in polar regions: climate, environment and experience*, by C. Michael Hall & Jarkko Saarinen (2010). London: Routledge. 318 pp. ISBN 978-0-415-48999-7. *Cruise tourism in polar regions: promoting environmental and social sustainability?*, by Michael Lück, Patrick T. Maher & Emma J. Stewart (2010). London: Earthscan. 246 pp. ISBN 978-1-84407-848-6.





These two edited volumes, which cover much of the same ground, both begin from a common premise: polar tourism, as its been experienced by wealthy travellers for over a century, has a very definite shelf life. With the acceleration of global climate change, the Arctic and Antarctic are being changed, changed rapidly, perhaps permanently and, if one pays attention to the news, seemingly by the day. When combined with popular documentaries and feature films like *An inconvenient truth*, *March of the penguins* and *Happy feet* potential polar tourists have been sensitized to see the polar regions not as implacably hostile wastes once challenged only by the likes of Nansen, Amundsen, Scott and Shackleton but as irreplaceably fragile zones that, once lost, will take some essential part of the planet with them.

According to several of the authors in these two works, this potent mix of science, media and popular culture has led to a new wave of "last chance" or "doomsday" tourism to the far north and extreme south. How many tourists are we talking about? The two volumes are in vague agreement that this tourism now amounts to more than 40 000 tourist visits to Antarctica per year and more than five *million* visitors to the Arctic and sub-Arctic.

Of course, as many of the chapters point out, in a variety of ways it is these self-same tourists who, by employing long-haul flights and behemoth cruise ships to get their last glimpses of a dying world, accelerate the planetary warming they are racing against. For example, "The paradox of climate change and polar bear tourism", write Dawson, Stewart & Scott in their contribution to *Tourism and change* (p. 97), "lies in the fact that tourists travelling long distances to view polar bears before they are gone, are disproportionately responsible, on a per capita basis, for increased GHG (global greenhouse gas) emissions, which ironically impact the health of the very resource they are here to see: the polar bear".

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Citation: *Polar Research* 2011, *30*, 7152, DOI: 10.3402/polar.v30i0.7152

Beyond the question of the contribution of tourism to global climate change, there are innumerable other issues involved in so many people visiting areas once considered beyond the normal routes of tourism and now felt to be immutably vulnerable to such traffic. These include: increased access to particularly vulnerable sites; tourism as a replacement for the more invasive forms of economic activity in the Arctic such as natural resources extraction; policy debates over resource management schemes; and, most frustrating, the almost complete lack of visibility on what those tourists are doing once they get their heavy boots ashore.

As Hall & Saarinen write in the first chapter of *Tourism and change*, "numerous gaps remain in our knowledge base" (p. 32). As an example, Hall argues in another chapter in the book that we don't have a good idea of the kinds of invasive species tourists and their delivery vessels are almost certainly bring into the polar regions. And such tourists and their ships have access, on account of global climate change, to areas of Svalbard and elsewhere once considered impossible to reach. In the *Cruise tourism* volume, Stewart, Draper & Dawson write of a Canadian Arctic where there exists a "basic lack of information on cruise tourism activities, alongside limited monitoring, lack of formal regulations and poor surveillance capability of cruise ship activities" (p. 133). This has created a situation where there is no centralized—much less comprehensive—source of data on just what all this activity is doing, either intrinsically or as a causal factor in the changing Arctic.

In the absence of hard data, scholars such as Roura, in his contribution to *Tourism and change*, are attempting to create coherent schema for defining human behaviour on sensitive sites. At present this amounts to a lot of "ings": moving, walking, standing, gazing, gathering, documenting and—no doubt most happily to cultural resource managers—leaving. However, without telemetric remote sensing at sites like Magdalenefjorden in Svalbard and Cape Adare in Antarctica to provide both real-time and longitudinal data on tourist behaviour, natural and cultural resource managers charged with ensuring that the heavily visited sites of the Arctic and Antarctic are preserved will remain effectively blind.

Both *Tourism and change in the polar regions* and the more narrowly focused *Cruise tourism in polar regions* seem to have had their origins in a 2007 conference on Tourism and Global Change in Polar Regions held in Oulu, Finland. It is not clear why these similar efforts could not have been combined. Indeed, some of the chapter authors for specific subjects (cruise tourism in the Canadian Arctic, for example) are the same in both volumes. Likewise, the polar tourism statistics that underpin much of the research in both volumes are repeated over and again, almost to the point where one is practically begging for fresh fieldwork. The vaunted International Polar Year, as Maher, Stewart & Lück write in the final chapter of *Cruise tourism*, did a pretty good job of ignoring social science research, to the surprise of no one.

Yet, while the two volumes cover similar ground, they approach it from very different stylistic directions. With a few exceptions, *Tourism and change* leans heavily on social science models of research and data analysis, while *Cruise tourism* reads much more as a collection of ethnographic narratives. This means that the chapters within *Tourism and change* are written in a more formalized academic style, while those in *Cruise tourism* generally adopt a more casual approach.

For example, in *Cruise tourism*, Mark Orams pens a terrific chapter on yachts that have visited Antarctica, while Bob Headland covers the opposite extreme, the North Pole cruises of Russia's great nuclear icebreaker fleet. Interestingly, among all the discussions of ships great and small, of popular films and heroic explorers, none of the authors in either volume mentions the pioneering expedition of Jacques-Yves Cousteau and his venerable wooden ship *Calypso* to Antarctica in 1972. Cousteau used a helicopter, a balloon, scuba and a submersible to film the brilliant *Voyage to the edge of the world*, which could be seen as marking the beginning of modern public interest in the continent.

Another unremarked dimension in all the discussions of environmental impacts of polar cruising is a notion my friend Magnus Forsberg and I discussed while observing the nuclear icebreaker *Yamal* cut its way to the North Pole in 2006: was this annual and massive displacement of ice also accelerating the rate at which the polar cap is melting? The general response of the Russian navigators was to shrug and say вероятно, probably. Headland writes that the captains try to follow their own broken path when they return southwards from the pole but such fidelity rapidly becomes impossible amid the shifting pack ice.

The one such departure from the overall social science approach in *Tourism and change* is a wonderful chapter by Mark Nuttall on his time as an historian on board the MS *Explorer* in 2006–07. Just about all anyone wanted to know was why Scott died on his way back from the pole. The multitudinous subtleties of polar history did not otherwise make much of a dent.

The ill-fated *Explorer*, which sank near the South Shetland Islands in 2007, makes several appearances in both volumes. It is employed most often as a clarion warning of what could happen if one of the current—and most definitely not ice-strengthened—mega-cruise ships

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toting over 5000 elderly "expedition participants" turned turtle and sank in Antarctic waters. No nation is prepared to undertake such a massive rescue on short notice several hundred kilometres from McMurdo or Ushuaia. And the disparity between the cruise tourist rich and impoverished working poor in the world today—which is as pronounced if not more so than it was in 1912—makes a new *Titanic*, in all its particulars, almost inevitable.

While we await that dramatic disaster, as these volumes creatively relate, the much more insidious catastrophe of global climate change advances upon us with the regularity of a metronome. And each year it invites more and more of those doomed tourists to see the doomed polar regions. Coming to grips with their numbers and potential disruptions will occupy resource managers for the next generation. These volumes begin to point the way.

On board the mighty *Yamal* in late August 2006, I was returning from my second voyage to the North Pole where, like Nuttall in the Antarctic, I had inflicted history on largely uninterested passengers who were by and large much more keen on the 24-h bar and the pretty Russian waitresses. The passengers had been assured of seeing some walrus. Having seen not a single such seahorse on our return through Franz Josef Land, we made our way back to heavily guarded docks of Atomflot near Murmansk. A small group of tourists gathered around the Russian tour leader to inquire when and where they were going to see their promised walrus.

"Murmansk Zoo," the tour leader deadpanned.

It was a clever response and defused any further complaints—a potentially serious problem for polar cruise tour operators. As Lück, Maher & Stewart relate in the opening chapter of *Cruise tourism*, a Northwest Passage passenger successfully sued his tour operator for promising and then failing to deliver "meter-thick pack ice" (p. 6). Given the inevitability of climate change, the thin thread of life in the polar regions may very well snap within the next hundred years. By then, tour operators will not be promising ice any larger than the cubes in your very expensive single malt; and the tour operator's humorous aside from 2006 will no longer be a joke. It will be a set of directions.