

## Growth and challenges in cruise tourism in Arctic Canada

*Emma J. Stewart, Jackie Dawson & Margaret E. Johnston*

The number of cruise itineraries in Arctic Canada has more than doubled between 2005 and 2013, in part as a result of the greatest regional warming on earth. This warming has led to a reduction in sea ice extent, opening up areas previously inaccessible for cruise ships and extending the length of the shipping season. Other factors contributing to the growth of the industry include greater availability of ice-strengthened vessels, a global demand for extreme and “last chance” tourism, the unique landscapes and wildlife of the Arctic and a growing base of cruise tourists amongst retired baby boomers. Based on the “expedition” model, cruise tourism in the Arctic emphasizes adventure, wilderness, education and personal experience.

Has the capacity of existing Arctic marine regulations and governance structures kept up with this growth? How are Northern stakeholders involved in managing the challenges associated with changing environmental and economic conditions?

Through a project entitled “Cruise Tourism in the Arctic” which began in 2009, Emma Stewart, Jackie Dawson and Margaret E. Johnston explored the potential for adaptive strategies and policy options to effectively manage the cruise tourism industry. This included documenting the growth of the industry, current policies, governance challenges and potential policy alternatives. They conducted almost 500 interviews, a series of workshops, round table exercises and surveys with residents of Arctic communities, cruise ship operators, policy stakeholders and others.

### **Policy and Governance: Context and Challenges**

Effective governance of the evolving cruise tourism sector is vital to enable emerging economic and sovereignty-related opportunities, to mitigate safety and security issues and to support environmental and cultural sustainability. Through their research with Arctic residents, cruise ship operators and policy stakeholders, six notable governance challenges were identified:

i. Inconsistencies associated with the multi-jurisdictional/trans-national operating context

- ii. Lack of guidelines for cruise tourism vessel operation and management
- iii. Lack of facilities for cruise tourism vessel operation
- iv. Challenges associated with a vast and demanding geographic landscape
- v. The outcomes of rapid change in times of high environmental and economic uncertainty
- vi. The regulatory and permitting environment is challenging

The following issues most directly impact Arctic residents.

There is a relatively robust policy environment for maritime shipping in Arctic Canada in general. However, there is no single point of authority for the governance of the cruise sector and no established sector specific development strategies, management plans, or sets of operational or site guidelines (outside of protected area restrictions). Decentralized management tends to cause a diffusion of responsibility among a large number of organizations and departments, leading to management gaps, oversights, and communication difficulties.

Compared to most other Arctic regions attracting passenger vessels, Canada’s tourism infrastructure and local services are minimal. There are no public-use deep water ports, re-fueling stations, or reliable re-supply locations; the communications infrastructure and search and rescue services are extremely limited; and there is a lack of tourism services and human resources. The closest rescue coordination centres servicing the Canadian Arctic are in Halifax, St. John’s, Trenton and Victoria. Even if rescue centres were strategically located in the North, as has been recommended by many stakeholders, serving the Canadian Arctic will remain extremely challenging due to the geographic extent, nature of the environment (i.e. ice conditions) and remoteness of the region. The challenging operating environment additionally makes it extremely difficult for authorities to monitor tourism activities, enforce regulations and distribute fines for non-compliance. Whereas cruise operators with years of Arctic experience have adapted to this challenging context, the

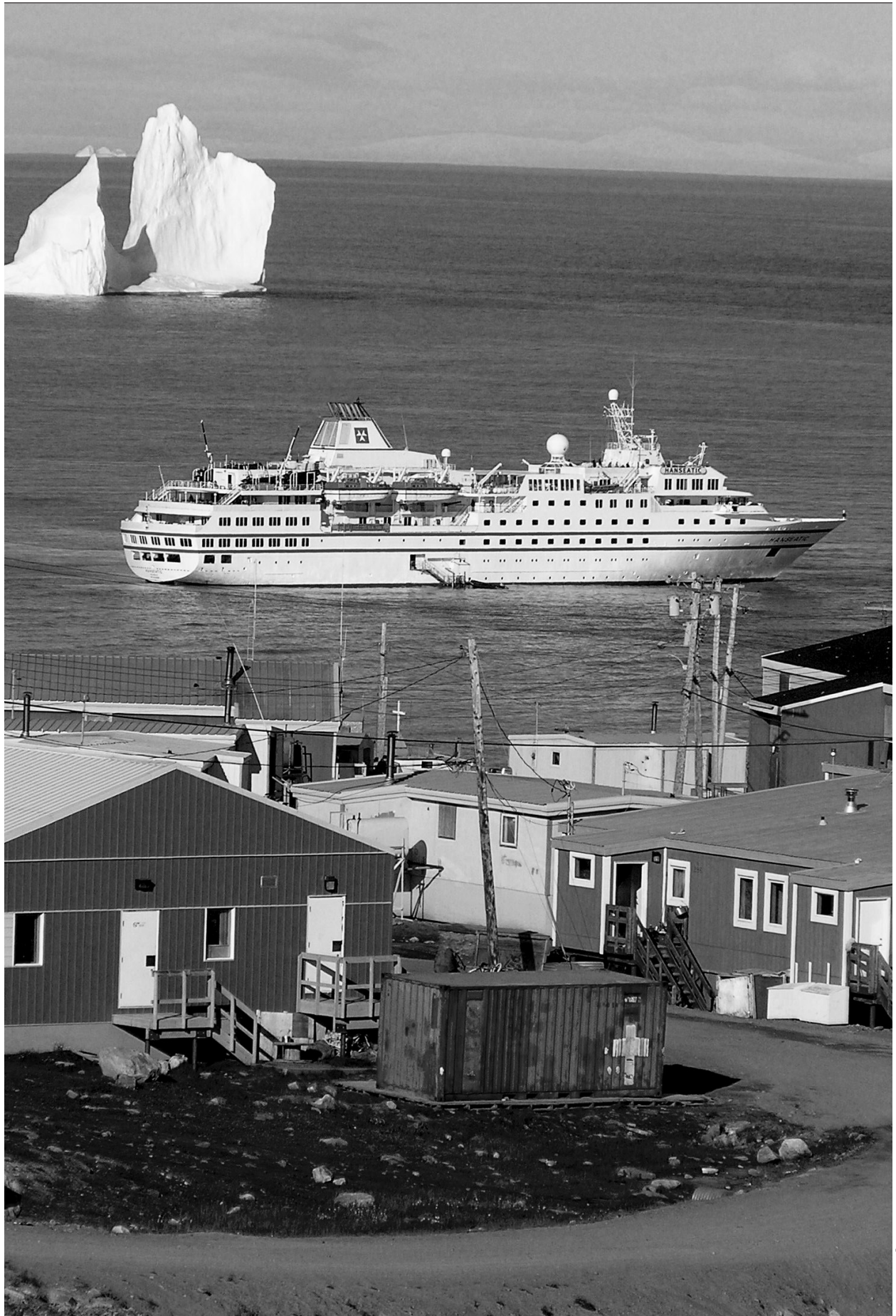


Photo credit: Emma J. Stewart

*The Hanseatic cruise ship departing Pond Inlet, Nunavut.*

abovementioned factors are of particular concern with the entrance of companies new to the region.

### **Views of Northern Residents**

Three communities — Pond Inlet, Gjoa Haven and Ulukhaktok — are all located along the popular cruising route, the fabled and historically important Northwest Passage. To document tourism change at the community level, the researchers employed a place-based case study approach that addresses complex socio-economic issues at a local scale (i.e. where impacts are being experienced) while still allowing for the consideration of influences from other scales. They conducted a series of semi-structured interviews with key community representatives and residents (involving 22 participants in Ulukhaktok; 52 in Gjoa Haven; and 47 in Pond Inlet). The majority of research participants had past and/or current experiences in tourism as managers, educators, Elders, artists, guides or operators (e.g. through the local hamlet office, RCMP, government of Nunavut, Visitor Centre Manager and local cooperatives). Research participants were recruited using a purposive sampling strategy, ensuring all community groups associated with cruise tourism were sufficiently represented.

#### *Opportunities*

Residents in Pond Inlet, Gjoa Haven and Ulukhaktok highlighted cultural and/or sporting demonstrations as providing unique opportunities for local performers to learn about Inuit culture, while also showcasing Inuit culture and tradition to visitors. For example, the success of the Pond Inlet cultural group is well known across Nunavut, prompting other hosting communities to model themselves on the Pond Inlet group. A member of the Pond Inlet group said that to "... keep alive the tradition of drum dancing and traditional singing, [the Elders] got their son involved when he was little ... so it has really helped my generation to also pass along that knowledge to the younger generation."

Similarly, guided walks were regarded as important opportunities to share local history with visitors, as well as to work with groups across the community. A long-term Pond Inlet resident commented on the sense of excitement felt by the tour guides when the cruise passengers arrive: "They're really excited that you can feel it when they are waiting for the people to come up to the beach [for their guided walk]."

The opportunity to meet new people, make

"friends" and to participate in activities with visitors was highly valued, as one of the Pond Inlet performers confirmed, "We form relationships, even friendships, among these visitors."

The generation of seasonal, indirect and supplementary income for the community, especially for the guides, carvers, artists and performers, was also noted, particularly in Gjoa Haven and Ulukhaktok, where

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cruise ship tourism is still relatively new. Overall, the opportunities presented by cruise tourism identified at the local level outweighed the risks and this result was reasonably consistent across these three communities.

#### *Risks*

By contrast, the range and number of risks or concerns identified by local representatives varied considerably between the three communities. In terms of economic impacts, and least among the residents' concerns, visitors were said to spend less on purchasing arts and crafts than is desired, and they usually only purchase small items. In terms of cultural concerns, some reported a sense of intrusion in the community, a lack of understanding by visitors of subsistence lifestyles, inappropriate photography by tourists, some language barriers between Elders and visitors, and concerns that visitors may bring banned substances into the community.

Significant concerns were identified in relation to marine pollution and the impacts of ship traffic on marine wildlife, as well as the possibility of diseases being brought to the community. A Gjoa Haven resident said, "I'm afraid that they're going to open their ship and pollute our ocean, our natural food source." Community risks were listed as a lack of infrastructure to support larger vessels, the problems associated with ships arriving unannounced or poor communications between ship and shore, the increased number of small vessels and yachts, and insufficiently trained people to work in the sector.

Concern about changing ice conditions, weather patterns and safe navigation were common among the three communities. In Ulukhaktok, questions were posed: "What happens if a ship gets caught in bad weather or hits rocks or ice and needs help? Who is going to help?" As residents in Gjoa Haven pointed out "we don't have the capacity or the auxiliary units to help out if a disaster happens in respect

to the tourism ships.”

Residents in Pond Inlet were more likely to identify concerns relating to tourism development, policy and strategy across the Nunavut region than residents in the other two hamlets. For example, tourism was perceived by some Pond Inlet residents as having low priority at the government of Nunavut level, with the consequence that, “there isn’t any one single agency taking the lead and there isn’t any one agency willing to be the coordinating agency.” A lack of data on the cruise sector in Nunavut was thought to further hinder efforts to manage cruise tourism effectively.

#### *Future actions and strategies*

Community residents also suggested potential actions and strategies that could be implemented to deal with the risks and opportunities, at community, industry and regional levels. These suggestions are too numerous to list comprehensively here, but several highlights in the category of community-specific strategies demonstrate the breadth of potential improvements: better interpretive services such as local craft shows and longer, more meaningful visitor experiences; improved infrastructure including vehicles for visitor transport and print materials to sell; human resource supports such as hiring local liaisons and raising community awareness of the potential to work in the tourism industry. At the level of industry, one suggestion was to hire more Inuit wildlife monitors. And at the regional level, residents in Pond Inlet highlighted the need for more strategic input in territorial tourism coordination, and communicating about visitor activities between the different hosting communities to avoid duplication of visitor experiences.

#### **Recommendations**

The Canadian Arctic is a full decade behind other Arctic nations who have been more proactive in establishing systems for managing and supporting a growing Polar cruise industry. It is vital that a harmonized policy framework is established to ensure environmental and human risk is minimized, and economic and cultural opportunities are maximized. Greater pan-Arctic collaboration and governance of the industry, through the Polar code, overarching organizational management or other initiatives, is urgent if a more effective regulatory framework is to be achieved.

Key infrastructure improvements should include: establishment of a deep water port with refuelling capabilities, updating regional charts and navigation protocol systems, enhancing satellite capacity and monitoring programs, creating Northern rescue and refuge centres, increasing resources available for the Canadian Coast Guard, and investing in community-based services and attractions. The level of invest-

ment required to make such infrastructure improvements is enormous. Private-public partnerships can help to improve multi-purpose and multi-use infrastructure that would not only serve cruise tourism, but also other vital economic sectors within the region.

Good governance of the sector will also contribute to establishing locally desired and driven economic development pathways since residents appear to be generally in favour of cruise tourism sector, not only because of the economic benefits but also for the opportunities to share culture and traditions and to learn about other people and places. However, communities and local resident support for the industry only extends so long as the sector is well managed and respects sensitive and culturally important shore locations, wildlife and other natural landscapes. Because of the lack of management plans, site guidelines, and best practices, the region currently relies on the good will and high standard of ethic expedition cruise operators have thus far displayed in Arctic Canada. However, as the operating environment becomes more competitive and new companies appear in the region, this standard may change.

Finally, it is also important to invest in research and programs that support successful economic development in the unique Arctic operating environment, and that clearly identify best practices and determinants of sustainable and diversified economic development. At regional and local scales investments should be made in social and education programs, health care, housing, and basic services that ensure the well-being of local populations. Considering the strength of a nation is based upon the strength of individual societies, the structures and institutions that are set up by society and the capacity that exists within societies, investing in local communities, regional and local organizations and local residents of Arctic Canada should be the foremost priority. ●

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#### *Note*

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