

## **Consultation response ref 2021/9496 and 21/4952 – MAKO**

### **1. Our company**

Grands Espaces is a tour operator specialized in polars regions. Created by Christian Kempf in 1998, we are offering for 25 years now expedition cruises to our passenger. The spirit of Grands Espaces is to protect the environment and make tourists the best ambassador of nature conservancy. Is this such a challenge but we strongly believe that “we well protected what we well known.” Christian Kempf is a scientific and a wildlife conservationist before to be the founder of Grands Espaces. Between 1973 and 1989, he realized 15 scientific expeditions in Svalbard, Greenland and North Canada, and founded the GREA (Groupe Recherche en Ecologie Arctique)

We operate since 2011 in Svalbard on 2 types of ships :

- A passenger's ship = 75 passengers (Ocean Nova)
- 2 or 3 yacht (12 passengers) depending the year

We are operating mostly in mid May to early September. We have also few ski cruise (charter) in April-May. It's representing around 1000 Passengers on the whole year.

#### **A. AECO member**

Since 2011, Grands Espaces is also AECO member. We are implied in the different committee of the organization to try to offer the best possibility of a tourism that take the utmost consideration for such a vulnerable environment, local culture and cultural remains as well as security.

#### **B. Training for guide**

Our polar guide program training is as follow :

All new guides in the company are following a formation, each guides already in the company is following upgrades each year (see below). Grands Espaces expedition leaders

and office staff are actively attending international meetings related to polar areas and tourist activities in high latitudes.

- **Theoretical formation** - 3 days - France - New guides

Topics :

- Expedition cruise spirit
- AECO and IAATO presentation
- Fauna, geology, glaciology, history
- Reactions to a crisis situation

- **Zodiac training** - 2 days - France - New guides

All guides need to have the french sea coastal permit. Then we organised some formation specifically to drive in icy and shallows waters.

Topics :

- Man over board exercices
- Operation approach, landing/beaching, boarding passenger in security
- GPS exercices

- **Rifle shooting** - 1 half day - France - All guides team - each year  
- 1 half day - Longyearbyen - guides on cruises - just before the cruise

A certificate is given by the instructors in France and in Svalbard as well

All guides with a rifle are applying now for the firearm permit delivered by the Office of the Governor of Svalbard.

- **First Aid intervention exercise** -1 day - France - All guides team - each year

Topics :

- Cardiopulmonary resuscitation exercices
- Actions on hypothermic person exercices
- Traumatology exercices : legs immobilization, bleeding injuries treatment

Grands Espaces is organizing since 2005 an annual 3 days meeting/conference on Arctic and Antarctic for all french-speaking polar guides, specifically dedicated to guides (guidelines,

polar bears, regulations, ecology...).

- **AECO Certificate** : As an AECO member, we do require all of our guides to get the new established online AECO certificate. Each new guide on the field is under supervision of an experienced one.

We really pay attention to yours Proposal concerning “Svalbard Protection Act” and concerning “Regulations related to tourism”. We are convinced that every law should evolve depending the field situation. Tourism is becoming more democratic in Svalbard and environment always more vulnerable due mainly to global changes. It’s in this perspective that we would like to go back on some of your proposal and send our comments

## **2. Proposal for amendment of Svalbard Environmental Protection Act – and regulations/orders given with authority in this Act from the Norwegian Environmental Agency, with reference 2021/9496**

- a. Proposal : Close larger national parks and Nature reserves for landings from cruise vessels / Landing permitted in 42 sites within protected areas / 13 sites with max 39 people / 7 sites with area limitations (no long walks)**

These proposals pose fundamental problems in our point of view. First of all, sites suggested open will be pressurized and overexploited. We have a lot of example of negative impact of over trampling and overcrowding of sites in different country even in Svalbard. One can cite the example of Magdalenefjorden which was overexploited by tourism industry and which parts had to be closed to allow the sites’ regeneration. We are afraid, in the future, the open sites should be closed because of their deterioration.

Instead of closing area, we are aware to speak about :

- More sites guidelines – we can help in that sens
- Regulating number of visitors or limit the times to visit like we can find in South Georgia for example with the royal albatross colony limited times (1hour) and visitors.
- Resting time of the area

We also can think about a collaboration between the authorities and the operator as we already contribute to some scientific program (happy whale, polar bear sighting...). We can record parameters in the field or pictures to help environmental survey and knowledge's of tourism impact.

**b. Proposal : Remove legal requirement to use site specific guidelines in 15 sites of Svalbard**

A lot of work has been done on many levels (authorities, AECO, operator contribution, scientific studies) to achieve the development of such specific guidelines on sites. We think it's a shame to deprive ourselves of such a source of information and work. We will prefer to continue to elaborate more specific guidelines to try to limit negatives impacts on some other sites.

Even in Virgohamna, we don't understand what does it bring to remove permission to land in Virgohamna. If the limitation (3x12 guest + 1 guide) remains, what the remove of obligation to apply permission will influe ? We should keep this application !

**c. Proposal : Ensure attentive behavior to avoid disturbance by e.g only walk on the paths where these have been established/are visible. Keep distance to protected cultural remains that are not in use.**

This is a big question concerning over trampling and environment. AECO has already implemented flora guidelines and we are working with. It's also interesting to consider sites one by one concerning this subject because its working differently from one site to the other. We should even more dig into the subject.

Culture remains are already strongly protected and the visit are heavily regulated in Svalbard, which is good. AECO again worked on specific guidelines about that. We should keep this high protection level but not increase more and more the distance. People must be able to be close to history of Svalbard. Don't keep them away from the past please.

**d. Proposal : Intensification of the ban on seeking out polar bears and requirement to keep at least 500 meters distance.**

Polar bears are strongly protected in Svalbard. Increasing even more the distance is going to change something ? What is the point for the authorities to increase the distance from 200 to 500 meters ? Is some studies about that? Is that going to increase the safety of polar bears?

To our point of view : Norwegian Polar Institute believes the regulations is already sufficient. AECO recommends to not approach closer than 200 meters with a cruise ship. Some polar bears are curious so they approaching themselves the vessel. Some other are really shy, and we already don't approach even at 500 meters is kind of polar bears to avoid any disturbance.

We need to know exactly what we try to protect with this new proposal. The main problem in Svalbard are (except global warming and reduction of their habitat) accident or incident which forced to kill polar bear. We can maybe even more work on this subject. There is no many accident with polar bear and expedition cruise because our activities do not lend themselves to a such meeting. We are on land few hours, no camping and no overnight on land. But we still can improve that part of the subject.

**e. Proposal : Prohibition of ice breaking in fjords and fast ice**

We agree with your proposition. We should reconsider our position and activities related to breaking ice. AECO already worked on this environmental consideration as described "Arctic species are depending on the sea ice for feeding and breeding, (...) the longevity of fast ice cover may influence the environment". So AECO recommend to do not break fjord ice during spring and summer and breaking of any ice should always be avoided if there is a risk of negative impact on the environment.



- f. 5 knots speed limitation in a distance of 500 meters from selected bird cliffs in the period April 1 – 31 August.**

AECO has guidelines speed limitation near bird cliff and birds on water. We think it can be a good idea to reduce the speed, which is already in AECO guideline. This is to our point of view more a subject to include in guide formation. We have to be sure by the formation to raise awareness polar guide to this kind of behavior.

- g. Keep at least 300 meters from walrus haul outs at sea.**

We will have the same remarks than for polar bear. We are not sure to understand what will be the point of such a proposal. Many researches show no negative impact on walrus from tourism (already regulated) in Svalbard. We have already different guidelines depending the group (female and male are different and have different behavior). The Norwegian Polar Institute don't recommend to keep 300 meters distance but to land at 300 meters from the group and then approach by walk slowly, closer but to 40 meters and in small groups which is already what we are doing.

The walrus are amazing animals, incredibly strong, big and "cute". There is a whole range of behaviors to observe in few minutes and it is a wonderful experience for people. Most of our passengers don't know about walrus before coming in Svalbard. The only thing they know is they have big teeth (it is pretty all). They know almost nothing about their habitat, their sociability, their sexual segregation. But after "a walrus experience", some of people leave Svalbard with a walrus t-shirt or a pin.... They are just become walrus ambassadors.

### **3. Proposal for substitution of "Regulations related to tourism" with "Regulations related to field safety" and the proposal to apply the Package travel Act in Svalbard, from the Norwegian Ministry of Justice and the Ministry of trade and industry**

- a. Proposal : Duty to report operations to the Svalbard Tax office if operations exceed 30 consecutives days in Svalbard or Svalbard waters.**

We are not agreeing with this proposal as there are more grey areas for us. There is no tax-exchange agreement between Svalbard and other countries. Foreign operators will be subject to double taxation.

Furthermore, a vessel has a number of operators responsible for different parts of the vessel operations. Who will be the responsible parties?

As for instance Grands Espaces, we are covered by two activities insurances in Switzerland and France. Taxes must be paid in this countries and by the way we need nowhere more insurances or charged by taxes.

#### **b. Proposal : Systematic health, environment and safety work (HES)**

The proposal is interesting as it should be aligned with international maritime regulations. We can work for example on the zodiac driving license of the guide.

#### **c. Proposal : Guide certification system**

We support that there should be a guide certification system **but not exactly** as presented by the proposal. We believed that the operator (and not the guide) has the overall responsibility for the operations. We think it can be more effective to involve the operator, maybe with a special certification and then delegate to the operator the polar guide formation.

We calculate the cost for each guides education in accordance with proposal will be between 100 000 and 200 000 NOK that is totally for a guide or for a company unrealistic. Almost everywhere in Europe we can provide High mountain formation or training at sea, there is highly existing qualified training and we can use such training guides for certain activities. There is also high-level shooting range training with big facilities and special training with moving target. There is a lot of interesting existing formation and we are ready to engage our guides in this way. A polar training is completely different for cruises at sea and skiing or snowmobile land and glaciers. All cruises industry guides have already targeted their training.

It can be interesting as well to use those existing facilities in the rest of the world than engage costs to have the facilities in Longyearbyen to form almost 500 polar guides.

Svalbard authorities can also administer an exam for guide already trained. We are aware to work hands to hands with authorities about that. AECO already set up an 'Field Staff Online Assessment' that provides assessment and self-assessment to the guide about his knowledge about "The Svalbard Environmental Protection Act" among other things.

In all cases, we think it's important to involve operator in such an operation, not to dictate.

#### **d. Proposal : Application instead of notification of travel**

This can be an interesting proposal as it can be in junction with guide certification scheme and our proposal to give operators the overall responsibility for the activities.

## **4. Conclusion**

We fully understand that measures need to be reviewed regarding increase in tourism. We will be very interested in collaborate with the authorities to ensure sustainable tourism operations and development. Our goal is not to work against authorities but hand in hand to find the best solution to combine tourism, environment and safety. We are fully aware that restrictions will have to be applied and that our activities will have to be reviewed in the near future.

The proposals must be based on existing studies or a fortiori request the implementation of scientific studies to better assess tourism impacts. We are aware to discuss measures to support research to study impacts.

Let's not put Svalbard under glass, let's not take Svalbard away from international consideration. On contrary, let us try to place it at the heart of considerations on global



changes and it also goes through tourism “as we protect well only what we know”. Ban less, on the contrary, let us sensitize even the public more. We are ready to work even and even more in that direction with you.

Everybody must be aware that since decades polar tourism is the best sentinel of polar environment, avoiding overfishing, polar bears hunting, gaz exploitation and future problems with Passages and militarization.