



A curious polar bear sniffs a ship's hull in Svalbard, Norway

IMAGEBROKER/ALAMY



OPINION

“Restricting the distance ships can approach a polar bear is not the answer.”

MARK CARWARDINE

THE NORWEGIAN GOVERNMENT IS introducing far-reaching changes to the regulations for polar bear watching. No one will be able to approach closer than 300m between 1st July and 28th February and 500m from 1st March to 30th June. If a bear swims or walks towards a ship, even if it is anchored, the ship will have to move away.

Furthermore, Zodiac inflatable boats won't be allowed to get any closer than 150m from walrus haulouts, or 500m from seabird cliffs. And there will be a significant reduction in landing sites, from around 240 to just 43 (inevitably causing a far greater impact on these few sites) with a weirdly arbitrary limit of 39 people allowed ashore at 13 sites and 200 at all the others (still far too many in my opinion).

It makes me wonder if the Norwegian government really wants to end all tourism in Svalbard. Who will want to take turns to see a tiny speck of a polar bear through a telescope? It claims it is trying “to protect wildlife and one of the largest wilderness areas left in Europe”. But the new regulations don't make sense. Tourist vessels are already forbidden from approaching a polar bear in any way that would involve disturbance or a danger to the bear or people – and, in my experience, that works very well. Besides, the real challenge Svalbard's polar bears face is not tourists but the precipitous loss of sea ice, due to global warming.

It's also a bit rich coming from a country that continues to hunt minke whales around Svalbard (I've seen whaling vessels in Longyearbyen harbour) and continues

to expand its oil and gas exploration in the Norwegian Arctic (which is home to nearly 1,000 polar bears). So much for protecting Arctic wildlife.

The real problem with ecotourism is sheer numbers. At the other end of the world, in the Antarctic, visitor numbers have grown exponentially from 6,400 in the 1991-92 season to 105,000 in the 2022-23 season. More people inevitably cause more disturbance – no matter how well they behave. Yet no fewer than 99 vessels visit the frozen continent, several carrying more than 2,000 passengers (although vessels with

“It's a bit rich coming from a country that continues to hunt minke whales around Svalbard”

500-plus passengers are not permitted to make landings). It's all too much. Cruising, of course, is a humungous bone of contention worldwide. The number of cruise ships has risen 20-fold since 1970 and some make the *Titanic* – once the largest ship on the sea – look like a small fishing boat. The biggest of them all has a crew of 2,350, and a maximum capacity of 7,600 guests. Personally, I think the largest cruise ships shouldn't be allowed to go anywhere.

Even the remote Galapagos Islands is struggling with overtourism – visitor numbers have more than trebled this century to about 270,000 per year. The Ecuadorian government has just doubled its park entry fee, to US\$200 per trip, in the hope that some visitors will be put off. But that won't work. Take Kenya's Masai Mara Reserve, which charges a US\$200 entrance fee per day in high season, while a one-hour gorilla-watching permit in Rwanda's Virunga Mountains costs a phenomenal US\$1,500 – and still they keep coming.

→ AT A GLANCE

- Mass tourism is overwhelming many parts of the world. European cities, in particular, have been making headlines by attempting to limit its harmful impact (with varying degrees of success).
- Ecotourism is no exception. It can provide a crucial incentive to protect local wildlife and contribute to a higher standard of living in lower-income communities, but it can also wreck ecosystems, disturb wildlife and impact ways of life.
- Some of the efforts to control the onslaught of 'aggressive' or overcrowded ecotourism range from limiting visitor numbers to restricting access to the most sensitive areas.
- Strict new regulations are being introduced in Svalbard, Arctic Norway, for example, to restrict polar bear watching. While some say this is a pioneering step in promoting sustainable tourism, others are not convinced.

Tourism in the Galapagos Islands is strictly regulated, with trained and certified guides, marked trails, severely limited numbers ashore and specific approved landing sites. But that's not the case in many places. We've all seen pictures of dozens of safari vehicles packed with tourists jostling for position at the Mara River, in Kenya, waiting for the famous crossing.

There has to be a balance. Responsible ecotourism can be an essential force for good – or it can cause unremitting havoc. But restricting the distance ships can approach a polar bear (or, more commonly, a polar bear can approach a ship) is not the answer. 🐻

Want to comment?  
Share your thoughts on Mark's column by sending an email to [wildlifeletters@ourmedia.co.uk](mailto:wildlifeletters@ourmedia.co.uk)