

## University of Groningen

### Het topje van de ijsberg

Boschman, Nienke; Hacquebord, Louwrens; Veluwenkamp, Jan Willem

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## **A Tourist in the Arctic**

J. de Korte

The main difference between a scientist working in the Arctic and a tourist visiting the Arctic is that the first one gets paid for being there, and the second one has to pay for it himself. Both may appreciate (or not appreciate) and enjoy (or not enjoy) the Arctic in the same way.

In 1966, when I was a biology student, I hitch-hiked to Northern Norway and took a job as a waiter in the mess-room of a coal freighter, the "Binney", which sailed between Harstad (Norway) and Longyearbyen, in order to see the Arctic. I left the ship in Spitsbergen and spent two months in the Hornsund area with a mountain climbers' expedition. The land was as I had dreamt it would be, and from that time onwards I have created and grabbed every opportunity to travel to and to be in the Arctic. A great opportunity was the Netherlands Polar Bear Expedition, which cooperated with other wintering expeditions in an international effort to take a census of the Polar Bear population throughout the Arctic. After a reconnaissance expedition in Spitsbergen in 1967–1969, four of us spent more than a year wintering on Edgeøya in East Spitsbergen. This experience made me determined to work in the Arctic as a scientist for the years to come.

For my studies on the ecology of the Long-tailed Skua I spent periods of five months (mid April – mid September) in 1973, 1974, 1975 and 1988 in Scoresby Sund (East Greenland), and this was concluded with a doctor's thesis. Expeditions to Peary Land (North Greenland) in 1998 and 1999 allowed us to make a comparison of the phenology of tundra birds in East and North Greenland.

In the mid-seventies I became a member of the Arctic Centrum at the University of Groningen. This was a group of professors with an interest in the Arctic, who wanted to start a study of Dutch 17<sup>th</sup> century whaling in Spitsbergen (Smeerenburg). Though they knew a lot about the Arctic they had not been there themselves and they welcomed my expedition experience and advice. From a group of candidates we selected Louwrens Hacquebord to be the coordinator and to organise everything that was necessary to carry out the Smeerenburg project. In order to finance the expeditions which had to be sent to Spitsbergen, and with the help of the businessman Henk van Veen (Carl-Denig B.V.), the Plancius Foundation was created with the aim of supporting Polar science. The

Foundation purchased a pilot ship, the “Pollux”, from the Netherlands state (Domeinen) via Groningen University in 1979. This ship was renamed the “Plancius” and was used to accommodate the Smeerenburg excavation expeditions in the early eighties. In those years I became the coordinator of the tourist activities of the Foundation, as I had worked in Galapagos in 1977 and 1978 on the impact of tourism on the breeding success of frigate-birds. There I had seen how one could use a ship like the “Plancius” for boat-based tourism in an archipelago with fantastic wildlife, where passengers could arrive by plane from the mainland about 1000 km. away.

In the first years of the tourist activities with the “Plancius” the paying passengers were supposed to help and finance the scientists in Spitsbergen, but soon the activities of the Foundation were mostly touristic, and the support for scientists in the field became less. The reason was that the Foundation was very short of money. The crew on the ship and the people in the Foundation worked on a voluntary basis, without payment, but still we could often not afford to give the berth of a paying passenger to a non-paying scientist. Another reason was that in the course of the eighties the scientists could afford to be more pressed by time than the classic Arctic field workers. They often preferred to use a helicopter, so they needed to be away from home for only a long weekend for their field work. The Plancius Foundation sailed with the ship, which was sold and renamed the “Waterproof” in 1988, until 1991. All those years there was cooperation between the Arctic Centre and the Plancius Foundation. In 1993 the Foundation supported the creation of a new Chair, the Leerstoel Arctische en Sub-Arctische Studiën, at the University of Groningen and Louwrens Hacquebord was appointed the Professor.

During the period as a senior scientist at the Arctic Centre of the University of Groningen from 1986 until 1994, I extended my studies on skuas to South Georgia in 1987 (Brown Skua) and to Antarctica in 1990–91 (Brown Skua and Maccormick Skua) where I worked in the team of Hacquebord on Deception Island within the framework of the first Netherlands Antarctica Expedition. On Deception Island, we became acquainted with Hans Ulrich Peter from the Schiller University in Jena (at that moment working as a tourist guide on a cruise ship), a specialist on skuas from Antarctica. With that university the Arctic Centre established a relationship which still exists today. In 1992 I travelled to Taymyr and Severnaya Zemlya (Russian Arctic) in order to collect DNA-samples from several (sub)species of skuas on the tundra. With the analysis of samples from skua populations in the Arctic and Antarctic we were able to unravel the relationships of the different taxa of skuas all over the world. In the same

summer we travelled to Novaya Zemlya, in the team of Hacquebord, who carried out an archaeological survey at the wintering site of Willem Barentsz.

In Severnaya Zemlya I worked in the field with Andrei Volkov from the Russian Research Institute of Nature Conservation. In this extreme High – Arctic area we found maybe 40 % of the world breeding population of Ivory Gulls, in some of the largest colonies ever recorded.

We continued to study and publish our findings until 2000 and there are prospects for new field work on this bird species in the Russian Arctic.

In 1991 the Plancius Foundation had started to sail tourists to Franz Josef Land and Antarctica on a research vessel, the “Professor Molchanov”, from the Russian Academy of Sciences. In fact, Russian scientists who we worked with in the Arctic had drawn our attention to this fine ship. It enabled us to extend our range to all Atlantic polar regions, where only bureaucracy was a hindrance to expansion. (N.B. Russia). At the same time, in 1993–1996 we used MI-8 helicopters to fly tourists to Franz Josef Land, Severnaya Zemlya, and the Geographical North Pole. Again we used our business as a means to support science as we flew tourists and scientists to all the Ivory Gull colonies of which we had any indication; we also found many new colonies.

In 1996 the Plancius Foundation sold its tour operating goodwill and all contracts to Oceanwide Expeditions (Vlissingen), while I was to work as a consultant in the new company, but for the old Plancius programme. The Foundation does not have many activities at the moment, but still supports the chair at Groningen University.

The growing tourism in the Polar regions is a challenge for Nature Conservationists and Tour Operators. Both want to keep the illusion of areas of untouched and pristine wilderness.

Both want people to become aware of the great beauty which is to be found in these areas

For the Nature Tour Operators it is vital to be able to continue to show such areas to passengers in the future because it represents their livelihood. We have been pushing for strict rules and regulations governing tourism all over the Polar regions where we operate, but especially in Spitsbergen, which was wild-west country forty years ago. Only when everyone accepts that we must not take anything but pictures, and must leave nothing behind but footprints is there any hope that we still can enjoy the Polar regions in the foreseeable future.

## SAMENVATTING

In mijn studententijd reisde ik voor het eerst naar Spitsbergen in 1966, als bemanningslid op een kolenboot, twee jaar later gevolgd door een overwintering met een Nederlandse ijsberenexpeditie op Edgeøya. In de zeventiger jaren, na drie seizoenen veldwerk aan de ecologie van de Kleinste Jager in Scoresby Sund (Oost Groenland), werd ik lid van het Arctisch Centrum van de Universiteit van Groningen. Van daaruit werd het Smeerenburgproject opgezet, dat werd gecoördineerd en uitgevoerd door Hacquebord. Om dit opgravingproject naar de resten van de zeventiende eeuwse walvisvaart in Spitsbergen te steunen werd vanuit het bedrijfsleven de Stichting Plancius opgericht, die via de Universiteit van Groningen de loodsboot verwierf, die onder de naam "Plancius" de Smeerenburg-expedities enkele seizoenen als basis diende. Tot in 1991 werden er met dit schip elk jaar toeristische reizen naar Spitsbergen aangeboden, daarna gebruikte de stichting een Russisch schip. Tussen de stichting en het Arctisch Centrum heeft vanaf 1979 een hechte samenwerking bestaan, welke in 1994 onder meer resulteerde in het indienen van een aanvraag voor een leerstoel voor Arctische en Sub-arctische studiën aan de Universiteit van Groningen (Plancius-leerstoel).

Als NWO-onderzoeker, gedetacheerd bij het Arctisch Centrum, voerde mijn onderzoek aan de jagers me naar South Georgia in 1987 en naar Antarctica in 1990–91. Na veldwerk in de Russische Arctis (Taymir, Severnaya Zemlya) en in samenwerking met de Schiller Universiteit in Jena gelukte het ons om met DNA-onderzoek een stamboom van alle taxa van de familie van de jagers op te stellen. De samenwerking met Russische collega's leidde ook tot nieuw onderzoek aan de populatiegrootte van de Ivoormeeuw in de Russische Arctis. Een project dat nog niet is afgerond.