

# Environmental Code of Conduct for Visitors to Heard Island

## *Introduction*

Heard Island is special. It is one of the few remaining truly wild areas in the world, and a place where humans are respectful and privileged visitors.

The isolation and harsh climatic conditions of Heard Island mean that the organisms and communities present are living on the edge. Even seemingly minor pressures associated with human activities can lead to major and long-lasting environmental impacts, particularly with regard to the potential introduction of alien species and their effects on the ecosystem.

Heard Island can, however, be visited without damaging those things that make it special. Your actions can contribute significantly to its protection. This *Environmental Code of Conduct* provides general guidelines to help prevent or minimise impacts during your visit.

Heard Island has isolated and distinctive ecosystems. In addition, major areas around the island are physically separated by active glaciers, creating discrete systems (analogous to islands).

This *Environmental Code of Conduct* cannot be expected to cover every situation. You should act on the advice and instructions of group leaders and always seek to minimise your impact on the Heard Island environment in all aspects of your visit.

## *Before you get there*

- Protecting Heard Island begins at home. Read this *Code* before you depart for the island and start planning early how to minimise your impact.
- Get to know the island and its environment. Learn about the values and locations of areas that have been afforded special protection and observe all restrictions.
- Obtain any permits necessary for your proposed activities.
- Think of the vessel transporting you to Heard Island as a part of the island itself. In terms of quarantine, don't take aboard any living organisms or items that might harbour organisms that could impact on the fragile ecosystems (e.g. plants, animals, soil). Remove unnecessary packaging before you get on the ship, and again before going ashore (e.g. film boxes, bubble wrap, plastic bags).
- Ensure everything to be taken ashore is meticulously cleaned (e.g. scrub boots, pick velcro, vacuum pockets, clean camera tripods and bags, tents, scientific equipment). Where possible take new clothing and equipment. Extend your scrutiny to gear that is not your own.
- Remember, the marine environment is part of the Heard Island and McDonald Islands Marine Reserve too – keep it clean and throw nothing overboard (e.g. food scraps, plastics, cigarette butts).
- To minimise human waste on the island, go to the toilet on the ship before going ashore.

### ***When you're there***

- **Tread lightly.**
- Document your visit (e.g. where you've gone, what you've done). Where possible, include GPS coordinates in your record of these details (eg. location of field camps, marine debris observed, sampling locations).
- Report all unusual occurrences and environmental incidents to your leaders (e.g. presence of rodents, fuel or chemical spills, entanglement of wildlife, volcanic activity).

### **Managing wastes and equipment**

- The goal is to remove all human wastes (including faeces, urine and washing water) from the island. In particular, day trips must endeavour to return all wastes to the ship, or alternatively, discharge into the ocean below high water mark in an area of rapid marine dispersal. If this is not practical, human waste must be buried at sites away from vegetation, waterbodies and wildlife.
- Do not swim, or wash yourself or your equipment in fresh water streams or waterbodies.
- Always secure equipment, stores and wastes to prevent foraging by wildlife and scattering by high winds. Unsecured items can also be a safety hazard.
- Manage fuel and hazardous liquids to prevent leaks or spillage. Store such liquids in air-tight containers and routinely inspect for damage or leaks. Avoid refuelling or changing oil in windy conditions or in areas that might direct accidental spillage into sensitive areas (e.g. lakes, vegetation, wildlife colonies). Use funnels and a drip tray and have spill equipment available.
- Do not interfere with any buildings, equipment, supplies, study sites or markers.
- Do not collect anything (e.g. souvenirs, rocks, bones, specimens, historic relics).

### **Travel, wildlife and vegetation**

- Take care around wildlife and vegetation.
- Trampling of vegetated areas can result in long-term plant damage or death. Many vegetated areas are also extensively used as nesting sites by burrowing birds.
- Think about your choice of route and select a path to minimise your impact (e.g. avoid wildlife colonies, burrows, unstable ground, soft vegetation).
- Do not disturb plants or animals to get better pictures.
- Do not feed the wildlife or leave food or food scraps lying around.
- Breeding may fail if animals are disturbed. Changes in wildlife behaviour (e.g. changes in posture or vocalisation) indicate disturbance - back off immediately.
- Approaching wildlife too closely may cause parents to abandon eggs or young, exposing them to predators.

- Be quiet when around wildlife, move slowly, stay low to the ground and adopt the recommended minimum approach distances (see table following) - the wildlife can interact with you if it chooses to.
- Remain together as a group when viewing wildlife. Do not surround individual seabirds or seals or a colony.
- Most ice-free areas on the island are used for nesting by burrowing birds. Burrows extend beyond the entrance hole by about one metre in any direction and will collapse if tread upon.
- Always give animals the right of way and do not block their access routes.

**When you leave**

- Leave no signs of your visit.
- Remove everything you take onto Heard Island, particularly rubbish, which endangers wildlife and spoils the natural appearance of the island.
- Take nothing with you but photos and memories.

**Minimum distances to maintain when approaching wildlife on foot<sup>^</sup>**

Species	Distance <sup>#</sup>
wandering albatross, southern giant petrel, Heard Island cormorant (shag), Antarctic tern	100m
Other albatrosses and breeding seabirds	50m
Breeding and moulting penguins	30m
Petrels and Prions* Heard Island sheathbill Breeding seals and pups	15m
Non-breeding seals and other non-breeding seabirds	5m

<sup>^</sup>Separate guidelines provide for the operation of small boats, vehicles and helicopters.

<sup>#</sup> These distances are only a guide and should you find your activities cause disturbance, greater distances should be maintained.

\* Includes cape petrels, Wilson’s storm petrels, Antarctic prions, fulmar prions, common diving petrels, South Georgian diving petrels.

**Notes:**

1. The *Code* does not supersede or replace the legal requirements and management provisions outlined in the *Heard Island and McDonald Islands Marine Reserve Management Plan*.
2. Some prohibited activities described above may be allowed in accordance with the relevant permit (e.g. scientific collections, leaving of equipment).

For more information regarding the *Code* or activities in the Heard Island and McDonald Islands Marine Reserve go to <http://www.heardisland.aq> or contact the Australian Antarctic Division at [himi@aad.gov.au](mailto:himi@aad.gov.au)