ANNEX J – IOTA AND THE ENVIRONMENT

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CONSIDERATIONS FOR EXPEDITIONERS

Sometimes keen IOTA expeditioners encounter problems with wildlife and environmental agencies around the world. The agencies' legitimate duty to protect the flora and fauna in island micro-environments, coupled with an imperfect under-standing of the nature of DXpedition activities and a fear of setting a precedent for further, possibly more damaging types of visits, has led them occasionally to deny access to areas under their control.

Legislation on this topic differs from country to country. The UK has Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSIs) aimed principally at restraining development of designated areas rather than excluding visitors. The European Community has Council Directive 92/43/EEC on the conservation of natural habitats and their flora and fauna. Article 6 states that: "Any plan or project not directly connected with or necessary to the management of the site but likely to have a significant effect thereon, either individually or in combination with other plans or projects, shall be subject to appropriate assessment of its implications for the site in view of the site's conservation objectives. In the light of the conclusions of the assessment of the implications for the site.... the competent national authorities shall agree to the plan or project only after having ascertained that it will not adversely affect the integrity of the site concerned and if appropriate, after having obtained the opinion of the general public". These concerns may be behind the caution which can be encountered when amateurs seek permission to land and operate on IOTA islands.

It would seem reasonable for amateurs to rely on the fact that in almost all cases a DXpedition will not have a significant environmental effect on the conservation status of flora and fauna - even in combination with other visitors or expeditions.

In seeking permissions, the task of the amateur is twofold - firstly to reassure the authorities that a portable radio station will not have a significant environmental impact and secondly to demonstrate a willingness to address authorities' concerns when planning the visit.

An ideal tool for planning would be a code of practice based on a firm scientific understanding of human impacts on the environment. Codes have been drawn up in other areas, so why shouldn't there be an environmental code of practice for radio expeditions? For example how much generator noise can we make without frightening birds?

Ideally, there would be extensive scientific research on the impact of human visits on wildlife populations but in practice there is very little hard data. IOTA Management has consulted a number of UK authorities and found that this area is still a wide-open area for research. Such evidence as does exist is largely anecdotal. Where studies have been done, the impact of human visitors on animal populations is often swamped by variations in food supply or weather. It may be safe to assume that the absence of evidence of problems is, in fact, evidence of an absence of problems.

One of the few research programmes carried out was at Cambridge's Scott Polar Research Institute where a few years ago they examined the impact of tourism in the Antarctic with one of their first projects the possible trauma inflicted on Antarctic penguins by groups of camera-waving tourists. It was thought that penguins would lock themselves into massive detours to avoid any spot where they once encountered a human – but this seems not to be the case. The Cambridge team's conclusion was that as long as the tourists displayed a reasonable amount of common sense and kept a minimum distance, about five metres away, there was little problem.

A wildlife expert consulted by IOTA Management has commented privately that a temporary human presence is most unlikely to be a problem on any island of significant size and only has the potential to cause problems in extremely small habitats, such as, perhaps, an individual group of rocks.

Viewed from the perspective of the wildlife authorities, the potential problems raised by an IOTA expedition include:

- Trauma to flora and fauna, caused by human presence, noise, smoke, etc;
- Disruption of wildlife breeding behaviours;
- Contamination of the site with litter and the spillage of fuels;
- Introduction of non-native plant or animal species;
- Disruption of archaeological sites by antenna guy stakes, earth spikes and similar invasive items;
- Injury to birds and feral animals caused by wire antennas or guys;
- Encouragement of further visits by amateurs and non-amateurs alike.

Clearly most of these can be addressed and DXpedition activities tailored to fit the situation. Areas of flexibility include:

- Timing of visit to avoid breeding and nesting times;
- Number of people and their length of stay;
- The use of headphones to reduce noise;
- Avoidance of particularly sensitive site areas;
- Battery or solar power – or just a suitably silenced generator. Consider gas rather than liquid fuel. Is mains power already available on site?
- A 100% litter removal – "Leave only footprints" – policy;
- Guy weights instead of stakes;
- Consultation with archaeological and wildlife authorities on antenna location and earths. Use of balanced rather than single element antennas or verticals as appropriate to the location, minimising wires and ropes.
- Tent concealments and camouflages;
- Use of high visibility tapes and markers on antenna structures;
- Antenna removal at dusk.

The bird strike issue seems to be a theoretical rather than an actual danger. It is raised occasionally in the USA at planning hearings on amateur towers but there is testimony from a number of bodies to the effect that it is not a problem. The Massachusetts Audubon Society has said that "danger to birds from amateur radio support structures is undoubtedly minimal" and a Massachusetts bird centre has commented "ham radio structures – even with wires hanging from them – do not present an unusual or increased risk to birds".

The problem of precedent setting for other visitors is perhaps harder to address. Whilst one or two visits may pose no environmental threat, one thousand almost certainly would. On the IOTA front we can argue that demand is self-limiting – after an expedition has worked down the pile-up, there will be fewer people who wish to visit until the island has moved back up the wanted list. But if amateurs are allowed in, authorities may worry that other groups will want similar access.

This is a complex issue with no easy solutions. IOTA Management welcomes dialogue with responsible authorities and continues to work towards, if not a code of practice, at least a check-list of typical concerns to be addressed. Success will depend on DXpeditioners' ongoing sensitivity to and awareness of environmental issues. A considered approach with good conduct in the field, strict adherence to agreed restrictions and responsible co-operation with authorities is crucial to achieve permission and ensure future access.