

Cruise control

Ocean rangers due full access aboard ships; that's the law

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The first report of the season on the state's ocean ranger program found restricted access and/or a lack of cooperation on nine of 28 ships sailing Alaska waters.

That's got to change.

Alaska voters passed the Cruise Ship Initiative in 2006. Among other requirements, the law required ocean rangers aboard all cruise ships in Alaska waters to ensure compliance with state rules on the treatment and discharge of wastewater and other hazardous materials.

Paul Johnson, a former Alaska marine engineer and now manager of the ocean ranger program for Crowley Maritime Services, surveyed ocean rangers in mid-June and found the least cooperative ships among the Holland America and Princess cruise lines.

Ocean rangers reported their work stymied by lack of access to control rooms, refusal to allow rangers to accompany ship environmental officers on their rounds, time restrictions, limited access to log books and other records and a refusal to let rangers talk directly to engineers on board.

Rangers said they were told that crew members were following cruise line policies.

Cruise lines need to understand that in Alaska waters, state law takes precedence over cruise line policies.

No good ocean ranger is going to interfere with ship operations. These people are professional mariners.

No good ocean ranger can monitor cruise ship operations and discharges without full access to equipment, crew members and records.

The whole point of the ocean ranger section of the cruise initiative was to verify that cruise ships are doing what they say they're doing. That doesn't work if the cruise lines get to make the rules by which the rangers operate.

John Binkley, head of the Alaska Cruise Association, said Holland America and Princess have promised him that they'll make sure ocean rangers have the access to do their jobs.

"It's the law. We know that and we understand it," Binkley said.

Gershon Cohen represents one of two citizens' groups that have filed a 45-day notice of intent to sue to force compliance by the cruise lines. Cohen, one of the sponsors of the 2006 initiative, doesn't buy suggestions by Binkley and Denise Koch, the state's cruise-ship program manager, that the problems are glitches or kinks normal in a pioneer program.

"This isn't kinks," he said.

Whether mere kinks or deliberate obstruction, what the errant ships are doing needs to stop now.

Rangers' complaints reflect the kind of industry arrogance that led to the success of the Cruise Ship Initiative.

To be fair, rangers rated 17 ships as cooperative and providing access. One got a qualified passing grade for access "most of the time." Another got a qualified failing grade; the ranger having just started work.

Johnson's report also reflected what rangers found with the most cooperative cruise ship crews:

"The best ships have crews who are proud of their ships and the way they take care of the ship and its passengers, and how they protect the environment. They are anxious to show the ranger -- and, by extension, the people of Alaska -- how well they are doing."

Binkley acknowledges the industry's opposition to the ranger program in 2006, but said he sees it now as an opportunity to confirm good work. Confirmation only counts if rangers have the access they need.

The attorney general and DEC need to make clear to Holland America, Princess and all other cruise ships in Alaska waters that ocean rangers will get all the access they need to guarantee protection of Alaska's water and fisheries. Cohen and company can bring legal action in 45 days, but we'd rather see another status report that finds every ship in compliance.

That's Alaska law. The industry can't cruise above it.

BOTTOM LINE: No cruise ship should deny Alaska's ocean rangers the means to do their jobs.