

Editorial

Expectations and realities - managing the Antarctic environment

The Madrid Protocol has now been in force for ten years. With continuing public interest in the Antarctic, the likelihood of further Parties acceding to the Antarctic Treaty and an International Polar Year with its estimated 40 000 scientific participants, how are we doing in terms of managing the land and its surrounding Southern Ocean?

The review of human impacts in this issue by Tina Tin and others is a salutary reminder that, despite the considerable efforts of some Parties, all is not well. Their extensive assessment does report progress in many areas but the overall tenor is that much more was expected and has not been delivered. Is this realistic? Good environmental management and monitoring is both expensive and limiting to the activities of both individuals and nations. The limited support for the Antarctic Environmental Officers Network shows that not even all national programme managers are interested in making it a priority. Even some of the scientists jib at following good practice if it gets in the way of their science. So we need to be practical about progress without lessening the objectives.

Openly questioning the progress of the Treaty Parties in environmental management, using their own published science and reports, is an important part of holding them to account, but in so doing we need to recognize that the Treaty System is a political not a scientific framework for inter-governmental agreement and thus is open to all the special agendas of its constituents.

Recognizing the reality of what can be achieved and putting it into context should not be seen either as defeatist nor opting for second best. The Antarctic is a special place and the Treaty Parties need to have objectives that are difficult to meet to ensure that they are always striving to do better. On the other hand, blocking progress by using bureaucratic devices - like insisting that the CEP must have all four languages for any formal inter-sessional meetings when CCAMLR uses only English for theirs - does not help to solve problems. What is surely not too much to expect from all Parties is more progress in using environmental impact assessment properly, the adoption of the unified monitoring protocols so carefully worked out by SCAR and COMNAP, and a system for pooling the data and archiving it at the Secretariat.

Those writing the review see the Antarctic as unique, as crucial for future science, as a wilderness without parallel that needs to be safeguarded for future generations. They see that the management tools have been agreed and wonder why they are not being properly used. And they cannot understand how short-term political advantage is more important than the long-term future of the continent. Why is India building a new station in an undamaged area that everyone else feels should be protected, where is the Chinese CEE for Dome A, why is it taking so long for the CEP to be staffed by the same quality of professionals as the Scientific Committee of CCAMLR, why do the Parties not recognize that the Treaty Secretariat could help in environmental management if only it was allowed to become a data repository for the CEP, why do Japan, Korea and others continue to slow progress over developing marine protected areas for endangered fish stocks, why do some Treaty Parties allow companies with damaging fishing practices to flourish in their jurisdictions, . . . and so on.

All however is not gloom. Let us also celebrate the progress we have made so far and the new vigour and more practical approach with which the CEP is addressing the problems.

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