

Guest Editorial

Polar Educators International – a new initiative for schools

Those who planned the last International Polar Year 2008–09 (IPY) were not only keen to be inclusive and interdisciplinary but also to ensure that lessons learned would be passed on. This planning for a legacy not only includes better data management and availability but a recognition that education at all levels is a crucial part of planning for the future uses of the Poles. Gathering educators and scientists in the Students on Ice educational workshop during the last IPY conference, in Montreal in 2012, provided the incentive for the formation of Polar Educators International (PEI), a new forum for bringing these educators together to encourage the exchange of ideas, the development of co-operative projects and tools, and the enhancement of the profile of polar education on the international scene.

Today it is surprising that polar education seems uncommon as a component of school curricula in most countries. However, such is the diversity of education management around the world that it turns out to be amazingly difficult to determine what is being done, and who is responsible. Some countries have centralised curriculum control whilst others, especially those with federal structures, have often devolved responsibilities to the individual states. In some there are prescribed textbooks and rigid curriculum constraints whilst in others there is flexibility of materials and processes over how specific subjects are taught and learning outcomes achieved. Even within one country, public and private education may work with quite different materials to ostensibly try to achieve the same targets.

It is not that polar elements and examples have been ignored in education at the international level but some of the initiatives have made very slow progress. The International Polar Foundation in Brussels has pursued school education initiatives in French, Walloon and English for many years, whilst the Scientific Committee for Antarctic Research (SCAR) has included education in its strategic aims, and its web site contains some very useful links to national initiatives, again in several languages. And there has been the development at the tertiary level of the Institute of the Antarctic, a global consortium now comprising 16 universities. At this level there are, of course, the well established courses at Gateway Antarctica in Christchurch, University of Tasmania in Hobart and the Scott Polar Research Institute (SPRI) at the University of Cambridge.

So what can PEI contribute to this international polar education effort and how could it do this most effectively? At a recent PEI workshop in Coimbra (Portugal), the enthusiasm for sharing practical ideas across countries was palpable as was the need to get PEI on a firm organisational footing. The recognition by SCAR, and by the International Arctic Science Committee (IASC), of its importance is a first step. But at the international level it would also be helpful to have commensurate recognition by other related organizations, such as the Council of the Managers of National Antarctic Programs (COMNAP). The activities of COMNAP could provide a valuable impetus to attract the interest of young people. Aircraft, ships, vehicles and other logistic infrastructure have always been fascinating for children and we should aim to build on that! Equally important is the need for adequate attention to be given to discussion of education and its development at the highest level - the Antarctic Treaty Consultative Meetings (ATCM). Whilst education is a regular agenda item for the ATCM there has been little of substance submitted for many years, and the Treaty lacks an independent international body to advise it in this field. Perhaps that is one of the major objectives that an active and truly representational PEI should be aiming for?

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