

Editorial

Antarctica's living resources: are they in safe hands?

No one could have welcomed the news that a Chilean biologist had made the first discovery of plastic debris on the Antarctic continent in 1984. Indeed, one would have thought that it would have reinforced the feeling that something ought to be done to prevent such discoveries becoming commonplace. The mortality that discarded plastic and other debris can cause in marine animals in many parts of the world is now well documented enough to justify doing all we can to avoid similarly polluting the Southern Ocean.

We could prevent it, or at least diminish the potential problem, by taking action now. One would expect that such action would be encouraged by, among others, the Parties to the Convention on the Conservation of Antarctic Marine Living Resources (CCAMLR). Some of the Parties are in favour of action. At the third meeting of the Commission appointed to carry out the obligations of the Convention, in September 1984, the US delegation proposed restrictions on the dumping of plastic materials in the Southern Ocean, which is the area covered by the Convention. The proposal was rejected, as were others to ban gill nets, to require separate collection of plastics and other non-biodegradable substances on vessels, and to require an inventory of types and quantities of netting brought into and lost in the Convention area.

Although these proposals met with support from within the Commission's Scientific Committee, they also met with objections from the fishing nations, who were unwilling to banish any net types not first proven to be harmful in the Antarctic. So, although the Commission agreed to study sources and effects of debris and to conduct periodic surveys of beaches and seal and penguin colonies to analyse the debris accumulating, it seems as though many animals may have to die before anything is done.

CCAMLR was created in 1980 by the Antarctic Treaty Consultative Parties in response to the need to cover the exploitation of Antarctica's living resources. It came into force in 1982 and meets annually to decide quotas and any other conservation measures necessary. The first two meetings were taken up by procedural matters and it was at this meeting that real conservation

measures were expected. Of particular pressing need are controls on fishing. In the 15 years since commercial fishing began there fish stocks have become severely depleted. For example, the populations of *Notothenia rossii*, once the dominant fish of South Georgia waters, have been reduced by overfishing to one-tenth of its level before exploitation. The non-governmental organisations concerned with Antarctica and many scientists believe that a ten-year moratorium on fishing is required to allow fish stocks to build up again. Although strong conservation measures were called for by some delegates, the fishing nations called for more data, which only they can supply. The Commission ended up by implementing measures relating to minimum mesh sizes and a 12-mile zone closed to fishing around South Georgia. But these measures had already been adopted voluntarily, so it was hardly the breakthrough the Commission claimed.

The meeting had not started very auspiciously as far as conservation was concerned. After the public opening speech and before the meeting retired behind closed doors to conduct its secret affairs, the Chairman, Mr Alan Brown, told the press that the Commission would not impose any quotas or moratoriums on Antarctic species at this meeting. This was before the Commission had received any evidence at all from its Scientific Committee.

So the conservation measures hoped for were not forthcoming. And indeed, it must be difficult to achieve anything very much when all decisions must be reached by consensus. It takes only one member to object for a proposal to be rejected, which is one of the most serious reservations about the potential effectiveness of the Commission to conserve Antarctica's living resources. The fears certainly seem to be borne out by this meeting. And can we hope for any improvement in the next meeting, which is due to take place in September 1985? While national interests prevail, it seems not. There are on the Antarctic Treaty's fringe a growing number of nations who would argue that the future of that continent is not in safe hands. It would be a sad reflection on the credibility of the Antarctic Treaty system to have to agree with them.