

Guest editorial

Antarctic politics and science are coming into conflict

The current political regime for the Antarctic stemmed from the activities of the non-governmental International Council of Scientific Unions (ICSU) in planning and implementing the IGY (1957–58); subsequently the Antarctic Treaty came into force in 1961. The Treaty promotes freedom of scientific research and international co-operation and in the first two decades of its existence this was an undisputed priority. SCAR, a committee of ICSU, is a non-political organization, which initiates, promotes and co-ordinates scientific research in the Antarctic. SCAR has always attached the highest importance to environmental protection and for over thirty years has readily accepted an advisory role in relation to the Treaty System. One Convention (CCAS on seals) has a built-in advisory role for SCAR — an unusual, probably unique function for an NGO. Another (CCAMLR on marine resources) often seeks advice from SCAR. The success of the Antarctic Treaty System owes much to SCAR.

In the 1980s additional interests were becoming prominent — the exploitation of fish and krill, minerals, tourism and environmental preservation. At the same time another group of NGOs, in combination as the Antarctic and Southern Ocean Coalition (ASOC) focussed their attention on the Antarctic. This well financed group has a predominantly political approach, and has been very successful in handling the media and tackling governments on environmental affairs. It engineered the wrecking of CARAMRA and paved the way for the Environmental Protocol and the prohibition on mining. Its aim is to achieve “World Wilderness Park” status for Antarctica — which could conflict with the needs of Antarctic science. Many Antarctic scientists have been disconcerted to find their long sustained efforts in environmental protection belittled or ignored in the media campaign on Antarctic conservation.

At the same time, however, the crucial value of Antarctic science to the world has become clearer in relation to understanding global phenomena. Antarctic data on climatic history, global warming, the ice sheet contribution to sea level change, ozone thinning and the effects of UV radiation on biota, and the value of Antarctica in providing a baseline for monitoring pollution are science not only of regional significance but of global importance. Weight should be given to this in planning a future political regime. But the requirements of Antarctic science are already clashing with ASOC's aims, although only a tiny fraction of the Antarctic is impacted in any way by scientific activities and the major environmental threats come from outside Antarctica.

What the Treaty system needs is independent advice on those matters under consideration which embrace scientific activities and data. SCAR should continue to fill this role, but it needs to be more proactive. SCAR is therefore taking several major initiatives. Firstly, an international conference on “Antarctic Science — Global Concerns” in Bremen, Germany in September 1991, will inform policy makers, administrators, environmentalists and the media about Antarctic science, its contribution to Antarctic and global affairs in general and to environmental issues in particular. Secondly, SCAR has set up a group on the Co-ordination of Antarctic Data, to organize all the disparate geographical, environmental and scientific data and make it more accessible to the scientific community. In addition SCAR intends to seek additional sources of funding to enable it to respond to the changed situation and plan more actively for the future. Antarctic science is now entering a critical stage in its development and the eventual outcome of the struggle will have world-wide significance.

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