

Guest editorial

The Environmental Protocol — scientific advantage or bureaucratic inconvenience?

Has Antarctica been saved now that agreement has been reached by all Consultative Parties on the Protocol and its four annexes and, if so, by whom and for whom? The environmental lobby seem clear that it was their efforts that provided the impetus for international agreement and that the Protocol will provide the protection needed for the “Last Great Wilderness on Earth”. It would be pointless to deny the considerable political impact produced by the NGO environmental groups but their contribution to the discussions was more emotional than factual. It would be equally unfair to overlook the major contribution from the Antarctic science community to the sensible resolution of this debate, a feature largely overlooked by the media.

If there is a lesson to be learned from these last few years it is that scientists will have to pay more attention to communication with the public — or have their case stolen by others more adept at presentation. Many will argue that they are scientists not publicists but all science, and especially high cost Antarctic science, needs public and political support. If we want to have decision making based on facts and not opinions we need to make sure the scientific voice is more clearly heard.

What of the future? The activities and importance of the Committee for Environmental Protection have yet to be established. Some foresee problems here but if the committee works in concert with the science community, through SCAR, it would be more profitable to see it as a useful avenue to provide increased science input to the diplomats at Treaty meetings. Of concern to individual scientists must be the way in which environmental impact assessments are going to be organised in each country, and if the increased costs of environmental protection and management are likely to be taken out of their science budgets. It is unlikely that everyone will be happy with the outcome of this.

Equally important to us all must be how quickly and to what standard each country will implement the new regulations. It is important to remember that Treaty agreements do not become legally enforceable until enacted into national legislation. For some countries this can take five years or longer and until then no action is legally required. A more positive approach would be for all operators to begin implementation now rather than waiting for the Protocol to eventually become legally binding. We can probably expect, indeed some think it inevitable, that a patchwork of compliance will slowly develop where, for some, expediency will outweigh international agreement. It seems more than likely that environmental organizations will continue their efforts to monitor Antarctic stations for pollution, waste management and conservation activities. How will these self-appointed policemen be received?

Is the new Protocol to the advantage of scientists or simply another bureaucratic hurdle to be overcome in whatever way possible? My view is that we have to introduce more rigorous environmental management to protect the future scientific value of the continent. It is in our interests to make it work. What is essential is that the regulations are based on scientific advice, are sensible and pragmatic and are adhered to by everyone — including the tourist companies and especially the military support systems. To enact new legislation that is not practical, acceptable and enforceable is to bring the whole system into disrepute. The new Protocol strengthens all the previous conservation legislation and provides a new forum for monitoring and reporting. Is there now the will to use it to advantage science?

D W H WALTON