

Guest editorial

Science and commercialism in Antarctica

There are increasing commercial pressures to send more people to the Antarctic. Visitor numbers each summer now exceed scientist numbers on the continent. The commercial operators working through IAATO have, to date, been largely acting in an environmentally responsible manner, realising that there is no point killing the goose with the golden egg. In fact, it has been argued that visitors to the Antarctic, many of whom are wealthy or influential, have played a significant role in increasing environmental awareness of the continent and its wildlife to politicians and to the public.

There have also been several cases of commercial operators helping out national science programmes. Examples are ship rescues, and assistance and deployment of scientists in remote locations. Anne Kershaw of ANI argues that her company can deploy scientists to some areas of Antarctica more cost effectively than national programmes can. Indeed, she has done this with USARP scientists. It is quite conceivable that countries such as China, Korea, South Africa and Australia, whose ships perform a vital dual role in re-supply and oceanographic research, could opt for commercial operators to assist with base re-supply and staff deployment freeing up their own ships for an increased science role. If this is cost effective, then science is the winner.

Further commercial developments envisaged have different overtones. Should cash-strapped Antarctic science turn to commerce to assist in the raising of research funding? In other words, in times of decreased science funding it could be tempting to (say) lease out part of a base to a tourist operator, and use the revenue to fund science. Should science groups use their research in Antarctica as sites for advertising commercial products? For instance computer manufacturers and telecommunication firms could provide science funding in return for exposure of their products on the icy continent. There will be other scenarios. An important point to stress is that commercial sponsorship is not new. It was a key feature of the expeditions of the "Heroic Age". At that time sponsorship was essential as governments would not pay fully for expeditions. After IGY came the heady days of governments paying fully for Antarctic endeavours, but now the circle appears to be closing again with increasing sponsorship and multiple funding systems. Remember, sponsors want a return on their investments!

It seems that there are two possible answers to the question: "Is it worth pursuing commercial funding to assist science in Antarctica?" On the one hand there are those who argue that a decrease in research is preferable to increased commercialism on the continent, particularly if this means greater visitor numbers. Conversely others argue that commercialism will increase anyway, so why not keep some control and manage this by linking it to existing science programmes wherever possible. Few scientists would argue that an increase in science funding is not needed. The trade-off however, is that increased science funding, by whatever mechanism, has the potential to increase scientist numbers on the continent, and increased commercialism will increase visitor numbers.

My personal preference is for the second opinion: that is science, through national programmes, should work hand in hand with commercial operators to ensure that some control is maintained because there is one thing we can be certain of, and that is that visitor numbers will increase. The critical point is that some overview be kept of the activities and impacts of the increasing visitor numbers. SCAR and the CEP should be thinking now on how to do this and it makes sense for the science community not to be overtaken by events.

CLIVE HOWARD-WILLIAMS
National Institute of Water and Atmospheric Research
Christchurch, New Zealand