



Antarctic Treaty nations: cosy club or environment protector?

by a Special Correspondent

One of the explosions that has killed Adelie penguins. Building the French airstrip will mean the destruction of a colony of 3000 Adelie penguins, while also threatening the only accessible colony of Emperor penguins on the Antarctic mainland.

Photo: Greenpeace

Antarctica — New Zealand's great white, ice back-door neighbour — has held sway over the imaginations of explorers since the continent's existence was mooted by ancient Greek philosophers.

But while its existence is referred to in Polynesian legends of long canoe trips south it was not until the voyages of discovery from 19th century Europe that the region assumed a place on the map of the world.

New Zealand became a staging post, a supply stop for numerous Antarctic explorers. The names of the heroes and those defeated by the frigid environment — Shackleton and Scott, Amundsen and Mawson — passed quickly into the folklore of courageous adventurers.

The early explorers had raised their homelands' flags, as mountaineers do to mark the success of a venture. But as the twentieth century matured with its sophisticated methods of air and sea travel the great unknown became an area of increasingly strategic and commercial interest.

Britain was the first country to call Antarctic territory its own. New Zealand was next; in 1923 the Ross Dependency was created. The countries which had been exploring the area followed suit; France in 1924, Australia in 1933, Norway in 1939, Chile in 1940, Argentina in 1943 asserted their own claims. Those sovereign claims to a slice of the ice remain.

With sea and air access to the mapped continent, scientific explorers took over from the adventurers.

The United States and the Soviet Union were interested, but rather than claim their very own areas they chose to ignore the claims of other countries. With competing interests exploiting Antarctic seas, and the search on for the secrets of a continent, the way was clearly open for human beings to disagree.

The super powers, the seven claimants, South Africa, Belgium and Japan met on an American initiative in 1959, at the end of the International Geophysical year. They put together the Antarctic Treaty which was ratified in 1961.

For most of its 25-year life the treaty has presided over an era when scientists co-operated for survival and to share their new discoveries. It maintained Antarctica as a sterile laboratory, keeping the ice as

the preserve of scientists. Nuclear and conventional weapons were banned and radioactive dumping was prohibited.

But emerging from the 1970's — a decade of international oil jittering — it dawned on the Antarctic Treaty nations that there was ne'er a mention of minerals or oil in the treaty.

They were alert to the exploitation of whale, seal and fish resources and agreed in 1977 to govern the interests of commercial fishers.

By 1980 they had put together the Convention on the Conservation of Antarctic Marine Living Resources to cover all species of life on the ice. Heralded for its ecosystem approach, the convention has, to date, spawned only bureaucrats based in Hobart, rules on procedure and numerous meetings.

Its last annual meeting incurred the wrath of New Zealand's scientific delegates by its failure to place more than cosmetic restraints on Russian fishers' over-exploitation of Antarctic waters, well away from New Zealand's stomping ground.

With that convention as their only model for additional treaty consensuses, the treaty nations have met five times — in secret — to try and put together a regime covering mineral and oil exploitation.

New Zealand diplomat, foreign affairs assistant secretary Chris Beeby, is chairing those talks. He is playing a key role in an international game which involves this country more directly than any other international negotiations ever have.

Two drafts of the proposed minerals regime have emerged so far. They accommodate the high-tech exploitation interests of oil and mineral companies more than the fragile, pristine environment which has excited the imaginations of so many.

The drafts make even New Zealand's environment protection and enhancement procedures look like a saviour's gift to a penguin. No agency is planned for protecting, inspecting or policing the environmental impact exploiters may have. Prospecting is unregulated and the drafts contain an automatic right to develop anything found.

Companies rather than countries will do most of the exploiting.

A further session of the minerals regime talks is to be held in Rio de Janeiro next month. Implicit is the assumption that exploitation will go ahead.

The Antarctic and Southern Ocean Coalition, an alliance of 150 environmental groups in 35 countries has kept a watching brief on all minerals negotiations to date. In New Zealand, members are Forest and Bird, ECO, FOE, Greenpeace and Focus on Antarctica. ASOC has echoed the cry of the 1973-75 New Zealand Labour Government which was unsuccessful in persuading other treaty nations to keep Antarctica as a world park. The world park option is still favoured by ASOC but seems an unlikely one to ever satisfy modern commercial explorers. ASOC therefore lobbies the countries involved to keep environmental and not political or resource interests paramount as they carve up the percolator of southern hemisphere weather.

Rather than allow exploiters to wreck havoc in Antarctica where chain reactions from an oil spill are totally unknown, ASOC seeks to keep the treaty nations, especially New Zealand, true to their often-voiced commitment to environmental protection.

Over the last two years ASOC and Greenpeace International have led the campaign against France blasting an airstrip near its D'Umont d'Urville research station. They provided information to other treaty nations which at first denied France was doing anything. Photographic and other evidence made them concede it was true.

ASOC has monitored all the minerals regime talks; it has sent observers to the living resources commission. It exposed France's plans for the destructive blasting of an airstrip.

ASOC considers the treaty nations are now facing a crisis of credibility in their commitment to environmental protection. To keep them true to their oft-voiced environmental aims, ASOC must keep up its international lobbying effort.

It is imperative that New Zealand conservationists have someone at the Rio de Janeiro meeting. A total of \$4350 is needed; if you think you can help, send a donation to: The National Secretary, Forest and Bird, PO Box 631, Wellington. 