

A COLD HARD LOOK

The Royal Forest and Bird Protection Society has long argued that the Government should be working towards a World Park for Antarctica. That possibility seems a step closer to reality with the recent refusal of Australia and France to sign the Minerals Convention. Alan Hemmings argues for why there should be no mining on or near the frozen continent.

During the 1980s we have seen Antarctica emerge from the very fringes of global awareness, to become an area of major international concern. Quite apart from activities on the continent itself, the discovery of the ozone "hole" over Antarctica in 1985, drove home the fact that Antarctica was, after all, a part of the global environment and subject to the effects of human activity elsewhere.

At the same time, our technological capabilities have increased to a point where some now entertain the greedy prospect of commercially exploiting Antarctica's likely minerals. Of course, exploitation prospects are not confined to minerals activities. Exploitation of the marine life of the Antarctic goes back a long way, with seals and whales, and, more recently, fish and krill taken in an almost totally unregulated manner. Antarctic tourism is a more recent development, but as tourism is now the biggest industry in the world, there will be increasing interest in this activity. Both present severe problems for the environment and conservation, but of an altogether more tractable nature than those associated with minerals exploitation.

Ironically then, we now find ourselves studying the results of our carelessness elsewhere on the planet, in the stratosphere over Antarctica, whilst preparing to behave in the same old way down below, on the continent itself. Despite all that thirty years of scientific research has told us about the fragility of Antarctica, and our experience of environmental degradation elsewhere in the world, we still seem in danger of approaching this last continent on the eve of the 21st century with the mentality of a Pizzaro.

Record to Date

At a time when we are being asked to accept minerals exploitation in Antarctica, it is instructive to look at our record with regard to the environment there to date.

Considering the enormous size of the place, the comparatively small number of people who have been there, the purported concern with protecting the environment and the supposedly benign nature of science, it

The Antarctic and humankind: have we the foresight to leave this fragile part of the world relatively undisturbed? Photo: Alan Hemmings

