

press release from the French Embassy in Wellington actually claimed their construction was carried out "with the full approval of the Antarctic Treaty partners", although Russell Marshall has since told me in a letter that this "is not correct". Although the d'Urville airstrip is the best known, others appear to be in the pipeline. The British, after the most cursory of environmental evaluations, are hoping to build a hard strip at their Rothera Station; the United States has looked at the feasibility of a strip at Marble Point, some 50 miles from McMurdo, and Australian commercial groups are looking at strips that would allow them to fly tourists in. The prospect of increased air traffic to and from Antarctica, together with the expectations that minerals exploitation and tourism generate, has led to a number of cities marketing themselves as "Antarctic Gateways". Here in New Zealand Christchurch hopes to build on its long association with the Antarctic in this way and Hobart (Tasmania), Punta Arenas (Chile), Ushuaia (Argentina) and Mount Pleasant (Falkland Islands) are being touted in a similar manner. The merchandising of Antarctica has begun.

On paper at least, the Antarctic Treaty and subsequent agreements (constituting the Antarctic Treaty System) may look to provide rules to protect the wildlife and plants of Antarctica. In practice however these "rules", which include agreements covering seals and marine living resources (but not whales) in addition to the Agreed Measures, and a great number of Recommendations, are left to individual states to interpret. Each nation operating in Antarctica is its own judge when it comes to interpretation of these agreements, indeed they are drafted to allow this. This is a fundamental flaw in the current system. Whenever anyone points to an apparently clear branch of any element of the environmental agreements (and this is always left to a non-governmental organisation) there is always an escape clause, which legitimises whatever has been done. If one were to accept the official line, it would appear that there has not been a breach of any environmental provision in the history of the Treaty. Obviously this is nonsense.

### Wastes Pernicious Problem

One of the most pernicious problems throughout Antarctica has been the fate of the wastes produced at the Antarctic stations and by field parties elsewhere. Wastes, ranging from sewage, through chemicals, discarded food, batteries, packing cases and defunct machinery and vehicles require sensitive disposal. In the vast majority of instances, there is no reason why the wastes cannot be totally removed from Antarctica. The reality is that much, probably most, of it is still disposed of in the Antarctic, often in a manner contrary to that agreed by the Antarctic Treaty parties.

At their biannual meeting in Rio de Janeiro in 1987, the Antarctic Treaty Parties agreed on Recommendation XIV-2, concerning Environmental Impact Assessment. Before an activity in Antarctica, states were to carry out an Initial Environmental Evaluation to determine whether the activity would have a significant impact. If it would, the state is to carry out a Comprehensive Environmental Evaluation, on the basis of which it then decides whether to go ahead with the activity. As has been the

case throughout the Antarctic Treaty System, each state is left to be its own judge on these matters. Nonetheless, even this requirement seems to have been flouted by the Chinese in the process of building their second station in Prydz Bay during the 1988/89 summer. When they set out on their expedition they announced that they were looking for a site in that region, but since they had still not actually selected it they could hardly have carried out any prior environmental evaluation. Naturally, they built their base and everyone looked the other way.

In the May issue of *Forest & Bird* I looked at the animals likely to be affected by the pollution from the Argentine ship *Bahia Paraíso* and the Peruvian ship *Humboldt*. Since those ships came to grief, we have seen the *Exxon Valdez* disaster in Prince William Sound in the Gulf of Alaska, an ugly forewarning of what can happen in Antarctica too if oil exploitation occurs there. If that spill, on the doorstep of the most technically sophisticated nation, can cause such widespread devasta-

tion, and prove so far beyond the available resources, it is not difficult to appreciate the scale of the disaster should it occur in an area as remote as Antarctica. Yet despite these recent experiences, New Zealand still does not have even a contingency plan for dealing with any sort of oil spill in the Ross Sea, its immediate area of interest.

The major international convention dealing with oil pollution at sea is the 1973 MARPOL Convention (there are no provisions under the Antarctic Treaty System dealing with oil pollution). New Zealand has signed MARPOL but not yet ratified it. According to the Ministry of External Relations and Trade, the Ministry of Transport is working to ensure ratification by the end of 1990. Yet, even this convention is of limited use in Antarctic waters. Many of the parties to the Antarctic Treaty are not signatories (there is no obligation to accede to MARPOL before entry to the Antarctic Treaty System). Further, under MARPOL's Article 3, the vast majority of ships likely to operate in Antarctic waters are effec-



Top: *Beauty on ice: although Antarctica can be unforgiving to humans, we ultimately pose a much greater threat to the continent than it does to us.* Photo: Alan Hemmings  
Bottom: *Despite a convention to protect seals, Crabeater seals are still killed to feed dogs in Antarctica and for so-called scientific sealing programmes.* Photo: Alan Hemmings.