

**W**HILE THE Environmental Protocol is certainly an important step on the road to protecting the world's last continental wilderness, it is far from the end of the matter. It may be signed, but it is not even completed, far less a binding international agreement. Signing simply puts the protocol in the same position as the Minerals Convention back in 1988, when it too was signed. Its entry into force is not guaranteed.

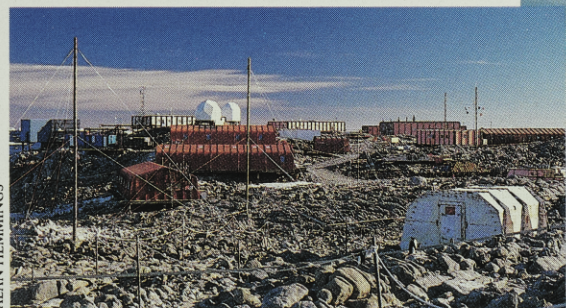
For the protocol to become a binding international obligation it must be ratified by all 26 consultative parties to the Antarctic Treaty. That alone will take several years. Furthermore, we have not even started negotiation, let alone drafting, of rules on liability in the event of damage to the environment there. This is no minor issue. It took six years to negotiate, and a further two years to abandon, the Minerals Convention, yet the liability provisions in that regime were never completed.

The goal of protecting Antarctica as a World Park, sought by Forest and Bird and others in the international Antarctic and Southern Ocean Coalition, has not yet been attained. So why the complacency about Antarctica since October? A major factor is the hype surrounding the signing. For the states of the Antarctic Treaty system it was an important testimonial to their claim to be acting in an internationally responsible manner towards Antarctica in the lead up to UNCED next month. It also restored some appearance of cohesion within the Antarctic Treaty system after the fiasco of the original June signing ceremony, aborted when the United States refused to sign. And, for environmental organisations, buffeted by both recession and

tially cut the staff and resources available to its high-profile Antarctic campaign world-wide. Greenpeace's US magazine declared that "few environmental campaigns constitute as great and unequivocal a victory as the successful decade-long struggle to protect Antarctica." Whether intended or not, it read like a valedictory. Antarctica disappeared as a media issue.

**T**HERE CAN BE little doubt that the protocol is a substantial advance on the Minerals Convention. Its 27 articles set out principles for the protection of Antarctica's environment, rather than its exploitation. Attached to the protocol are a number of technical annexes. At present there are five, dealing with environmental impact assessment, conservation of fauna and flora, waste disposal, marine pollution and protected areas. Further annexes can be added.

States commit themselves to comprehensive protection of the Antarctic environment and its dependent and associated ecosystems. Antarctica is designated a natural reserve, devoted to peace and science. Science remains the priority Antarctic activity, but all human activities must undergo prior environmental impact assessment. Mineral resource activities, other than scientific research, are specifically prohibited, for a minimum of 50 years. A Committee for Environmental Protection is established in an advisory role and the Antarctic Treaty Consultative Meeting (the decision-making forum) will now convene annually.



personnel burn-out, it could be seen as the light at the end of the tunnel. Everybody, it seems, wanted to project it as a victory.

Greenpeace, the most prominent group in the campaign, followed the protocol signing by announcing removal of its World Park station from Antarctica – although clearly the decision predated the signing. At the same time, it substan-

*The Antarctic Peninsula. The coasts of Antarctica are the most dangerous in the world for shipping. Although the protocol now extends the international marine pollution convention known as MARPOL to Antarctica, it preserves the immunity that convention allows to ships owned or operated by governments. In Antarctica, virtually all ships are owned or operated by governments.*



*The Pointe Geologie archipelago shows dramatically the impact humans can have in Antarctica. The biggest island is given over to the sprawling French Dumont d'Urville station (inset) and five others have been levelled for an airport. Only four islands remain in their original state in one of the most biologically important (and beautiful) parts of Antarctica.*