

The future of Antarctic environmental protection

Environmental challenges facing Antarctica in the future were the focus of a workshop at this year's Committee for Environmental Protection meeting in Edinburgh, chaired by Australian Government Antarctic Division Director, Tony Press.

Not surprisingly, climate change featured prominently. While the attending experts in environmental science and policy agreed that human activities in the Antarctic do not generate significant quantities of atmospheric pollutants, research and monitoring of change at the 'southern front' was considered vital for understanding and addressing global implications. This is important for a range of reasons, including:

- warming temperatures might cause populations of cold-loving Antarctic species to shift further south, with implications for site-specific approaches to area and species management;
- under a warming scenario the Antarctic could become more hospitable for unwelcome introduced species, making the implementation of rigorous quarantine measures critical; and
- increased melting of snow and ice at locations where rubbish and other waste was dumped many years ago could result in the exposure and release of harmful contaminants.

With continuing – and in some areas increasing – scientific research, support operations, fishing and commercial tourism, effective management of future human activities within the Antarctic region was not overlooked. Greater collaboration in science and logistic support was discussed as a potential way of minimising the overall footprint. Other goals included: improving energy management and increasing the use of renewable sources; focussing conservation efforts on vulnerable areas through a better understanding of the Antarctic environment; and working more closely with other Antarctic Treaty bodies and non-Antarctic bodies to develop environmental protection measures.

The next task is to formulate a prioritised five-year work plan, so the Committee for Environmental Protection can start putting these good ideas into practice.

EWAN McIVOR
Environmental Policy and Protection, AGAD

AUSTRALIA HANDS ON A LEGACY OF ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION IN ANTARCTICA

The Director of the Australian Government Antarctic Division, Dr Tony Press, completed his second and final term as Chair of the Committee for Environmental Protection (CEP) this year.

Since his election as Chair in 2002, Dr Press has overseen the Committee's work to provide advice to the Antarctic Treaty parties on measures to protect the Antarctic environment. Some of the highlights of his tenure include improving the environmental impacts assessment of activities in Antarctica; assessment of some 50 management plans for Antarctic protected areas; and improving the methods for storage and handling of fuel in Antarctica. The CEP has also become increasingly active in looking at ways to manage tourism so that environmental impacts are minimised.

At the conclusion of the ninth CEP meeting in Edinburgh in June Dr Press was congratulated on his leadership of the CEP. The meeting welcomed newly elected Chair, Dr Neil Gilbert, of New Zealand. Australia also handed over the role of providing the Committee's secretariat to the recently established Secretariat of the Antarctic Treaty in Argentina.



Outgoing CEP Chair, Tony Press (right), incoming CEP Chair, Neil Gilbert (centre) and the first CEP Chair Olav Orheim (left) of Norway.

Mercy dash for Australian patrol ship

The Australian Customs and Fisheries patrol ship *Oceanic Viking* made a 1800 nautical mile mercy dash from the remote Southern Ocean to the Indian Ocean, in October, to help save the lives of two critically ill men.

An Australian Government Antarctic Division doctor on board the ship performed emergency surgery on one of the men, with the assistance of Customs Officers specially trained as lay surgical assistants. Both men were eventually transferred in a stable condition to a hospital on the island of La Reunion, east of Madagascar, for ongoing assessment and medical care.

The Minister for Justice and Customs, Senator Chris Ellison, said the *Oceanic Viking* was diverted from a planned patrol of Australian waters around Heard Island and McDonald Islands (HIMI) on October 11. He said the patrol ship diverted to the French-owned Kerguelen Islands to pick up a seriously ill 43-year-old man; a fisherman from a licensed fishing vessel.

'The man had suffered a heart attack a few days prior and needed urgent transfer to more comprehensive medical facilities in La Reunion,' Senator Ellison said.

En route to La Reunion the *Oceanic Viking* then responded to an emergency request for assistance from a bulk carrier, the *MV Dynasty*, travelling between Brazil and China. The ship reported that it had a 35-year-old crewman in critical condition with a burst appendix.

'Thanks to a treaty between France and Australia on illegal foreign fishing, our interests were always protected while the *Oceanic Viking* was undertaking this important medical mission. The safety of life at sea is the prime concern of any mariner and the Australian Government supports this important international convention. The *Oceanic Viking* will always respond to distress calls while carrying out its patrol duties,' Senator Ellison said.

The Antarctic Division Polar Medicine Unit has been providing medical support to Australian Customs Fisheries patrols in the HIMI region since 2003. The *Oceanic Viking* previously undertook a medical evacuation of a seriously ill fisherman in the Southern Ocean in 2004 (*Australian Antarctic Magazine* 8: 26).



Australian Customs officers transfer the sick crewman off the bulk carrier *MV Dynasty*, in the Southern Ocean.