

Antarctic Peninsula under the microscope

At the invitation of the United Kingdom, Australian Antarctic Division (AAD) Environmental Manager, Tom Maggs, participated in a joint inspection of facilities on the Antarctic Peninsula in February and March this year. The inspection was hosted by the United Kingdom Foreign and Commonwealth Office and included a representative of the British Antarctic Survey and the Peruvian Antarctic Institute.

Conducted under the provisions of Article VII of the Antarctic Treaty and Article 14 of the Environmental Protocol, the inspection covered 14 occupied stations, five unoccupied stations, one station under construction, five historic sites, and a tourist vessel. This represents the activities of 14 Antarctic Treaty Parties.

Inspections are a valuable means of ensuring compliance with the provisions of the Treaty and the Protocol. They also enable inspectors to develop a sense of 'best practice' in relation to environmental and operational issues and to compare the variety of solutions to similar problems, which can inform their own programmes and be shared with other Parties.

The inspection team noted that the nature of research programmes varied from world-class research to basic observations, with research facilities from the elaborate to the rudimentary. As there appeared to be little coordination of research between Parties active on the peninsula, the team suggested that the Scientific Committee on Antarctic Research undertake an audit of Antarctic science.

Although the team inspected or flew over five unoccupied stations, other stations in the region were undergoing major expansion, and one new station was under construction. Thus there is scope for greater regional cooperation and sharing of facilities.

At most stations the importance placed on protecting flora and fauna was apparent from the variety of posters describing the local environment and rules and guidelines to ensure its protection. Some stations had well developed environmental

management systems in place or under development, and the attention paid to minimising and managing waste was consistently of a good standard. Many year-round stations had elaborate sewage treatment plants and incinerators, however there appeared to be little awareness of the risks of introducing non-indigenous organisms to the Antarctic environment.

Of particular concern was the state of facilities for fuel storage and handling at several stations, and the associated procedures for their use. In some cases, five separate fuel transfers were required to deliver fuel from the resupply vessel to the powerhouse, greatly increasing the risk of a significant spill. Some stations had no secondary containment (such as bunding or double-skinned tanks), and some tanks and associated valves and pipework were in a poor state of repair.

The final report by the inspection team – presented to the 28th Antarctic Treaty Consultative Meeting in Stockholm in June – highlighted the need and scope for better collaboration between Parties in the development and use of stations and resources. This is particularly so in areas such as King George Island, where the stations of many Parties are concentrated in Maxwell Bay and Admiralty Bay.

An Antarctic Specially Managed Area has already been developed to coordinate activities and minimise environmental impacts at Admiralty Bay. Parties active in Maxwell Bay have begun discussions about a specially managed area for the region. The Council of Managers of National Antarctic Programs has also agreed to undertake a survey of fuel storage and handling infrastructure across all Parties and report back to the 2006 Antarctic Treaty Consultative Meeting.

Australia is grateful to the United Kingdom for the opportunity to work closely together on such an extensive and important inspection.

—TOM MAGGS

Environmental Policy and Protection Section, AAD

The Inspection Team and members of the 2004 wintering party inspect the bulk fuel storage facility at Argentina's San Martin station on Barry Island.



TOM MAGGS

Members of the Inspection Team (in orange survival suits) with the 2004-05 summer team at the Bulgarian station St Kliment Ochridski, on Livingston Island.



TOM MAGGS