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SPEECH AT THE LAUNCH OF *HEALTH OF ANTARCTIC WILDLIFE: A CHALLENGE FOR SCIENCE AND POLICY*

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[CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY]

Antarctica, that most remote of continents, is one of the last frontiers in global exploration, a place of fascination and huge challenge.

In fact the Antarctic is an archive of the world's natural history, a climate change and wildlife laboratory.

Drawing on a deeper understanding of the geological, natural and climate history that makes up the Antarctic, and building knowledge of this place, will equip us to meet the big challenges of the future, especially dangerous climate change.

It is the case that our use and activities in Antarctica are increasing exponentially, and we must be careful to not unknowingly increase the pressures on the Antarctic environment.

Over a decade ago, in 1998, a collection of eminent scientists from Australia and around the world gathered in Hobart to explore a range of very complex and vexing matters that present themselves in Antarctica.

The result is this comprehensive collection of discussions, reviews and case studies which look at what we know, and what we need to take into consideration for our future engagement, and also the ramifications human activities across the globe have on Antarctica.

It also poses a number of thought-provoking scenarios for governments and policy makers as we plan for the future – legal, political and environmental – in the context of the Antarctic governance system.

Impacts on wildlife

I welcome the release of *The Health of Antarctic Wildlife*, a detailed examination of potential threats to the health of the many species in Antarctica - such as seals, sea-birds, and phytoplankton - from humans unknowingly introducing disease agents, from global warming, from illegal, unreported and unregulated (IUU) fishing, and even from pesticides transported by global atmospheric circulation to the otherwise pristine Antarctic environment.

There is literally a small library here of examples that I could reference, but let me just speak to a couple.

Seabird populations, for example, are known to be at risk through the influences of human activities, principally fishing.

The global expansion of long-line fisheries poses the greatest overall threat to seabirds. Long-lines can be up to 100km long and have up to 10,000 hooks.

Each year thousands of birds unnecessarily die when they ingest baited hooks during the setting or hauling of the lines. This is totally unacceptable and of great concern to me.

The good news is that Australia has been at the forefront of research leading to the adoption of measures that have now virtually eliminated seabird by-catch in some fisheries.

The most successful example has been in the Southern Ocean where the Commission for the Conservation of Antarctic Marine Living Resources (CCAMLR) has reduced seabird mortality to very low levels. But there is more work to be done with fishing industries in other parts of the world.

The pressures of climate change

And of course there is the crucial role of the Antarctic and its surrounding oceans in the regulation of the world's climate, which is becoming better understood at a time of great urgency, with the visible impacts climate change already being noted including:

- rising temperatures in the ocean, cryosphere and atmosphere:
- and, increasing levels of ocean acidity, freshening of the surface and deep layers, and an overall reduction in sea ice extent during the last century.

Australia has led substantial work highlighting how vegetation in the Antarctic and sub-Antarctic regions are likely to be among the first plant communities to be effected by global climate change because they live in an environment that is changing faster than anywhere else on the planet. As such they are important climate sentinels broadcasting effects that will be seen more widely as climate change progresses.

As part of a long-term, multi-disciplinary program, Australian Antarctic scientists are currently participating in an international project investigating sensitivity to climate change in terrestrial ecosystems.

The aim to better understand the interactions between climate change and biodiversity in Antarctic, and that is critical scientific research.

The Human Footprint

The Health of Antarctic Wildlife also features contributions which present detailed critiques of the growing impacts of our physical presence on the Antarctic environment.

From the late 1960's when commercial tourism in Antarctica began, until the early 1990's some 60,000 tourists had visited the region; in the four years from 2005 to 2009 more than 116,000 people came as tourists.

Every indication is that visitor numbers will continue to rise. Within the foreseeable future, it is expected that more than 1.5 million tourists will have visited Antarctica.

This growth in the industry, along with the continuing presence of people conducting scientific research and changing attitudes to the environment, bring into question how human activity should be managed to protect the Antarctic environment.

Beyond Antarctic tourism, there are also significant impacts from the activities of the growing national research programs.

This is a matter I want to make some broader comments about.

It's important to note that there are fourteen stations within the Australian Antarctic Territory (AAT), of which only three are Australian.

In recent years several countries have significantly increased their activities within this area:

- Russia, which has seven stations throughout the AAT, is rebuilding its station in the Larsemann Hills (100km southwest of Davis);
- China is also expanding its station – Zhongshan - in the Larsemann Hills and has recently completed a second station at the highest point of the AAT; and
- India has also commenced construction of a station in the Larsemann Hills.

It is my very strong conviction that as more countries take an increasingly active interest in the Antarctic it is crucial that Australia continues to play a leading role in efforts to realise the global benefits of Antarctic science and environmental protection.

After all, the Antarctic Treaty binds us to that task, as does our overall responsibility to steward the Antarctic's precious environment.

Australia's actions

Conscious of the increased activities of other countries in Antarctica, including in the AAT, the Government is committed to ensuring that Australia's interests continue to be advanced, including through:

- Continuing the funding in this Budget for the intercontinental Airlink;
- Developing our logistics capability to work more closely with those active in the AAT (including through undertaking several medivacs this season on behalf of other countries);
- Promoting an enhanced inspection program, whereby under the Antarctic Treaty, Australia has and will continue to inspect the stations and activities of other countries active in east Antarctica; and
- The development of a 10 year Science Strategic Plan which seeks to encourage, guide and focus Antarctic and Southern Ocean research so that it can deliver the maximum benefits to Australia and to the international community.

Furthermore, as a consequence of the research that went into this book, Australia has developed our own procedures – building on the principles of the Madrid Protocol - to reduce the chance of disease introduction and spread by human activity and we encourage other nations to adopt similar precautions.

Additionally, I recently secured amendments to Australian Antarctic legislation to:

- Enhance protection afforded to specially protected species;
- Strengthen the permitting system to more tightly control the authorised introduction of organisms into the Antarctic; and
- Update the offences to require persons travelling to Antarctica to take greater precaution against the accidental introduction of non-native organisms into the Antarctic.

Whilst we are proud of the actions that Australia has taken recently and in the past, we can and we must do more to better manage our presence in Antarctica.

I note the research in this book by Julia Jabour on the human footprint in Antarctica. While there are stringent measures in place, the Government is always looking to improve impact assessment, monitoring and inspection programs for Antarctic stations, both in terms of how countries measure their human impacts, and also how to remediate them.

Australia is hosting the 35th Antarctic Treaty Consultative Meeting (ATCM) in 2012 and there we'll be showcasing our world-leading research on Antarctic contaminated sites assessment and cleanup.

Conclusion

The Antarctic is an extraordinary place, a living laboratory, and a crucial driver of the global weather system.

It's environment is fragile and vulnerable, and our responsibility to better understand and better conserve its extraordinary qualities is paramount.

Protecting its plants and animals means understanding entire ecosystems, as well as the responses of individual animal and plant species.

It's important to recall the long history of exploitation of Antarctic marine living resources through activities such as sealing, whaling and fishing, with consequent damage to the ecosystem.

A number of species have become threatened by over-harvesting and illegal, unreported and unregulated fishing, whilst other species are now vulnerable to the threat of extinction due to non-targeted human activities.

The risk of introduced diseases to Antarctic wildlife grows as the number of visitors to the region increases, and as bases and stations expand, so too do their footprints.

Australia has a proud record of leading the world to provide greater protection to the Antarctic environment.

The research completed to date has addressed some important issues and enabled a refinement of understanding the effects of human activity on Antarctic wildlife, and it is here that I commend the efforts of the contributors and editors – Dr Kerry and Dr Riddle - who have provided such a valuable contribution with this work.

We've certainly come a long way since activities in Antarctica began.

We're far more aware of the consequences of our actions while we're working and visiting there.

But we're also gaining a greater understanding of the impact our actions in the rest of the world can have on this special place.

This is a journey that continues to inform the Government's Antarctic program.

We are dedicated to increasing understanding of Antarctica.

We are committed to ongoing and continued collaboration with our international Antarctic colleagues, informed by the work of those who research, study, use, and who spend time in this icy continent, for its health is so important to the planet.

And so, it gives me great pleasure to launch this landmark book today... *The Health of Antarctic Wildlife*.

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