

PROTECTING ANTARCTICA: AN ONGOING EFFORT

Address by the Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade, Senator the Hon Gareth Evans QC, to the Opening Session of the 1993 Fenner Conference on a Conservation strategy for the Australian Antarctic Territory, 8 February 1993, Canberra.

When I last spoke to an "Antarctic" audience, on the day of the signing of the Madrid Protocol on Environmental Protection to the Antarctic Treaty, 4 October 1991, we were bathing in the satisfaction of victory - reaping the rewards at the end of a difficult, almost Amundsen-like, journey.

At that time, Australia, in partnership with France, had just negotiated a two-year course through the international Antarctic bureaucracy to have Antarctica declared a "nature reserve - land of science". As you know, the Madrid Protocol, now awaiting ratification, puts in place a comprehensive protection regime for the Antarctic environment, bans mining and establishes Antarctica as a natural reserve devoted to peace and science.

But like many of the best polar explorers, we have not rested on our laurels at one success. We have continued to advance the interests of science and the environment in Antarctica, not least by the establishment, under my Department, of the Australian Antarctic Foundation - one of the sponsors of this conference, along with the Centre for Resource and Environment Studies at the Australian National University. The Foundation has in its charter the objective to promote informed debate on international Antarctic issues, with particular attention to developments in that region of importance to Australia.

It is therefore a great pleasure for me to open this 1993 Fenner Environment Conference, on the theme of a Conservation Strategy for the Australian Antarctic Territory. The development of a conservation strategy for the Australian Antarctic Territory is a major project of the Foundation, which commenced active operation at the beginning of last year. The Foundation has commissioned D F McMichael and Associates, of Canberra, to develop the draft strategy and this conference, which involves a cross section of the Australian community with an interest in and knowledge of Antarctica, will provide a very important input to that process.

The proposal to develop such a conservation strategy is not a new one. The Antarctic Science Advisory Committee (ASAC) in its 1988 report on Australia's Antarctic Science program, called for the development of a conservation strategy and this was picked up by the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Environment, Recreation and the Arts in its 1989 report on tourism in Antarctica. Later still, ASAC's 1991 report on

Antarctic research priorities for the 1990s linked the need for a conservation strategy for the AAT to Australia's commitment to the development of a comprehensive environmental protection regime for Antarctica.

News just last month of four separate private expeditions to the South Pole in the space of two weeks is a timely example of the increasing pressure being placed on Antarctica by human activity. (Perhaps more astonishing than four expeditions to the South Pole in a fortnight was the news last month that a Sydney yachtsman is taking 200 teddy bears to Antarctica to take "holiday snaps" of them on the ice for their owners. The enterprising yachtsman, Don McIntyre, a veteran of the 1990-91 around-the-world BOC Challenge, is charging \$50 per teddy in an effort to raise funds for the Royal Alexandra Hospital in Camperdown! One wonders if the likes of Amundsen and Sir Douglas Mawson are turning in their graves at the thought.)

Australia's credentials for the establishment of a conservation strategy are well established. Even before the Government's decision in May 1989 to promote a ban on mining, Australia had for many years taken an active interest in the protection of the Antarctic environment. The main instrument through which our interest had been furthered was, of course, the Antarctic Treaty itself. Although the Treaty has little to say on the protection of the environment, the experience of the Treaty regime shows that environmental concerns have been accorded a high priority by the Treaty Parties.

The 30-year history of the Treaty regime has, in a sense, been a chronicle of the development of measures to address conservation concerns as those concerns have been increasingly recognised. A recommendation of the First Antarctic Treaty Consultative meeting held in Canberra in 1961 called for the adoption of general rules for the preservation and conservation of living resources in Antarctica. Agreed measures for the Conservation of Antarctic Fauna and Flora followed at the Third Consultative meeting in 1964, and the Convention for the Conservation of Antarctic Seals was adopted in 1972 to prevent their over-exploitation.

The Convention on the Conservation of Antarctic Marine Living Resources (CCAMLR), which was adopted in Canberra in 1980, was a landmark in the development of measures by the Treaty Parties to protect and preserve the environment. The Convention reflected an ecosystem approach to the conservation of Antarctic living marine resources and marked a significant advance on the approaches to conservation that had been adopted up to that time. The designation of Australia as depository of the Convention, the establishment of the secretariat in Hobart and the designation of an Australian as the first executive-secretary of the Commission established under the Convention was testimony to the important role that we have played.

Australia has also taken a high profile on many other measures adopted by the Treaty

Parties, including the siting of stations, a code of conduct for Antarctic expeditions and station activities, waste disposal, oil contamination, marine pollution and environmental monitoring.

The negotiations on a Convention on the Regulation of Antarctic Mineral Resource Activities, which Australia declined, in 1989, to sign, marked a further watershed in the Treaty Parties' approach to environmental issues. Although the Convention would have included provision for protection of the Antarctic environment from some of the impacts of mineral resource activities, the Australian Government finally came to the view, rightly, that any mining in Antarctica was incompatible with the protection of the Antarctic environment. This view, which the rest of the Antarctic community eventually came to share - with a little bit of campaigning to help them along - resulted in the negotiations over the next two years which led to the Madrid Protocol.

Apart from the ban on mining, a major achievement of the Protocol is the series of environmental principles it sets down for activities undertaken in the Antarctic Treaty area. Activities are to be modified, suspended or cancelled if they result in impacts upon the Antarctic environment inconsistent with those principles and environmental impact assessment procedures are required in the planning stage of any activities to be undertaken. A committee for environmental protection will be established to provide advice and to formulate recommendations to the Parties in connection with the implementation of the Protocol.

In fact, there is no parallel in any other region of the world for the adoption of a comprehensive environmental protection regime such as that contained in the Protocol, and Australia has good reason to be proud of its contribution. The Madrid Protocol has been favourably received, even by some critics of the Antarctic Treaty system, and it has enhanced the standing of the Treaty system in the United Nations.

All the Consultative Parties have now signed the Protocol and are committed to its earliest possible ratification and entry into force. Australia has passed legislation to give effect in Australian law to the obligations it will assume under the Protocol.

Against this background of active and sustained Australian activity in support of the adoption of international measures, why is it necessary for Australia to now embark on the development of a conservation strategy for the Australian Antarctic Territory?

Most calls for the development of such a strategy predated the conclusion of the Madrid Protocol. They were couched in terms which suggested that Australia should give expression to its concerns to adopt a comprehensive approach to the protection of the Antarctic environment by developing a conservation strategy for its own Territory. Some may argue now that because the Madrid Protocol has established an international regime

for environmental protection, there is no need for unilateral approaches in particular regions such as the AAT.

The Government believes, however, that the development of a conservation strategy of the sort contemplated will help to further advance and complement the international obligations we will assume under the Protocol. The development of the strategy will provide a framework for the environmental management of the Territory and carry the message internationally that, not content only with our commitment to act in accordance with the principles laid down in the Protocol, we are actively working to adopt a structured approach to the application of those principles and are prepared to spell out in some detail how they will be applied.

A conservation strategy will, moreover, provide a reference point to develop more detailed management plans for particular areas within the Territory and we see the development of the strategy as the logical next step in implementing on the ground the environmental principles to which all parties have agreed.

The strategy will be an Australian document and will articulate a consistent approach to balancing the sometimes conflicting demands of conservation and human activity in the fragile environment of Antarctica. We hope that it will serve as an example to other countries active on the continent.

Remote as the Antarctic seems to be from the rest of the world, it is both becoming more accessible and being accessed more. The pressure of the establishment of an increasing number of scientific stations is becoming a problem in some areas and Antarctica is, as I said earlier, increasingly becoming a tourist destination, with consequences for the environment with which the Treaty Parties are only now beginning seriously to grapple.

The human impact on the Antarctic environment is thus becoming a serious issue. At the same time, the level of interest in Antarctic research and recognition of the role of that research in the study of climate change is increasing. We need to find a coherent approach to reconciling these various demands. It may be that the remoteness of the Australian Antarctic Territory as compared even with some other parts of the continent has meant that, so far at least, it has been spared some of the excesses that have afflicted other areas. But we cannot count on this continuing.

It is against this background that this conference has been convened. We are hoping to tap into your expertise to assist in the development of a document which will establish a framework for Australia's future activities in Antarctica. Such a document should reflect the high quality input this country has made to the Antarctic environment debate over the past 30 years and will be another Australian initiative watched closely by the international Antarctic community. I wish you well in your endeavours and look forward to hearing of

the results.