Secrecy on Ice

Antarctic exploitation will be the international resource issue of at least the next two decades, but all negotiations between members of the Antarctic Treaty will be held in secret.

At no time during the meetings will any public or press be allowed to listen to, let alone take part in, the discussions. But the Antarctic Treaty nations are not playing the game by the rules that they themselves set up. As Article III of the Antarctic Treaty states - "every encouragement shall be given to the establishment of co-operative working relations with those specialised agencies of the United Nations and other international organisations having a scientific or technical interest in Antarctica".

Secrecy has been a dominant feature of all discussions by Antarctic Treaty nations, especially since the exploitation of resources has been on their agenda.

At three previous meetings held in Australia to discuss Marine Living Resources, press and interested public were constantly barred, except for the 15 minute opening ceremony. The Antarctic and Southern Ocean Coalition (ASOC) has monitored Antarctic meetings from the outside despite a genuine interest in the environmental sanctity of the earth's last untouched wilderness.

ASOC, representing over one hundred environmental groups globally, certainly comes within the category described in Article III of the Treaty. No matter how many times the Treaty nations claim that their first, overriding interest is in the protection of the unique Antarctic ecosystems, it is clear that the delegates will spend the bulk of their time in Wellington thrashing out an exploitation position which is acceptable to both claimant and non-claimant states.

When these negotiations become difficult and protracted, the government delegations will reduce in number until 14 men and their immediate advisors will make the decisions affecting a whole continent. While a solution to the problem of territorial sovereignty may satisfy both sides in the debate there is no guarantee the Antarctic ecosystem will not be destroyed.

Antarctic Conference organisers argue that premature release of information on the exact state of negotiations could jeopardise delicate bargaining positions, but they fail to recognise the resulting opportunity for speculation and rumour.

Two weeks ago in Hobart, representatives from virtually every delegation objected to one journalist's attempt to expose conference secrets. The paranoid desire for secrecy by Antarctic Conference participants is one real cause for concern.

CLOY AND CABAL

Immediately before the recent Hobart meetings official representatives of the seven claimant states met secretly in Canberra to discuss their collective position.

The members of this exclusive cabal are Great Britain, New Zealand, Australia, Chile, Argentina, France and Norway, and while it is expected that parties will group informally, it is believed this meeting was the first of its kind. Major Treaty nations excluded from the Canberra meeting were USSR, USA, Japan and West Germany. The meeting was called to discuss the question of minerals and to arrive at a negotiating strategy between claimant states.

PETTY SECRECY

Secrecy reached new depths at the Wellington conference on the opening day. Senior conference organisers were unable to provide even a clue to the direction that conference proceedings were taking. Members of the conference secretariat did indicate that the newly elected chairman, Chris Beeby, might provide the answers to most obvious questions, but they could give no hint as to whom Mr Beeby would be providing a press briefing, if at all. Conference organisers were unable to tell us where the official reception would be held.

Needless to say, the public were excluded from Monday's opening addresses by delegation heads. As it happens, the opening speeches usually stay well away from controversial subjects and dwell on safe topics like the weather.

RSA Says Falklands An Oily War

The New Zealand Prime Minister, Mr. Muldoon, in a speech to the Returned Services' Association (RSA) on Monday, said that the "British are not fighting in the Falklands for mineral resources as yet undiscovered - but for the principle that aggression must be seen not to pay".

Mr Muldoon's views on the Falklands dispute were not shared by the RSA's Dominion President, Mr S.B. Leuchars, in his speech on defence matters. Mr Leuchars observed that the importance of the Falklands and their dependencies "lies in their command of the approaches to that part of Antarctica where there are conflicting territorial claims by Great Britain, Chile and Argentina".

While not fully measured, exploration has indicated possible major oil reserves. Control of the Falklands would also give access to rich fishing waters if a 200 mile economic zone were declared.

Mr Leuchars also pointed out that the continued on page three
PERMANENT WILDERNESS
THE BEST CHOICE

The protection and preservation of the Antarctic environment is an issue which ECO believes should be raised in all Antarctic forums. It is even more important, however, that at a meeting set up to discuss Antarctic minerals there should be a full and frank acknowledgment of the environmental hazards of mineral exploitation. The consequences of short-sighted policies could be disastrous.

The Treaty nations have at least demonstrated a nominal commitment to the principles of environmental protection and stability in the Southern Ocean. The Treaty is notable for its provision for scientific exchange, and its proclamation of Antarctica as a demilitarized zone is unique.

Agreed measures for the protection of Antarctic wildlife have been instituted, informally, while formal guidelines are in place to cover any future exploitation of Antarctic seals.

The advent of the Antarctic Marine Living Resources Convention (AMLR) has seen the ecosystem approach to resource management used for the first time. This principle has provided for the most comprehensive fisheries agreement ever concluded, and must surely also be applied in the current negotiations. A holistic approach to environmental protection is required, and ECO urges the consultative parties to expand their commitment to these principles.

It should be remembered, though, that the Treaty nations have had a relatively easy job in establishing, and policing, guidelines and restraints to protect the Antarctic wilderness while the continent has been the sole domain of scientists.

National interests have not been under threat, nor the Antarctic wilderness exposed to industrial relations. It should be noted, however, that with science as the Antarctic’s most profitable enterprise, the Treaty has successfully kept the peace between the claimant and non-claimant states for the past 20 years.

With mineral exploitation, however, the sensitive question of ownership of territory and resources cannot be side-stepped. With offshore oil as the most likely resource to be exploited, territorial claims and their adjacent continental shelf must immediately come to the fore.

Conflicting political interests currently prevent exploration from taking place. A solution to these political differences is likely to be made at some sacrifice to environmental principles.

There is, however, an expectation that environmental protection will continue as a basic principle guiding the negotiations for a Minerals Regime, irrespective of the desire of the parties involved to exploit Antarctica.

Unfortunately, it appears that de facto exploration projects are now under way, and that some scientific research programmes are being designed more with minerals in mind than with any other consideration.

The Treaty powers themselves have, since 1977, adopted a policy of voluntary restraint, urging all nations to refrain from all exploration and exploitation of Antarctic Minerals Resources until a comprehensive fisheries agreement is concluded, and must surely also be applied in the current negotiations. A holistic approach to environmental protection is required, and ECO urges the consultative parties to expand their commitment to these principles.

According to ECO, the principles of environmental protection should be imposed on mineral resource activities on the Antarctic environment in order to provide for informed decision making, determine whether mineral resource activities would be acceptable; and regulate the ecological, technological, political, legal, and economic aspects of these activities in cases where they would be determined acceptable.

ECO endorses these recommendations and believes that an indefinite moratorium should be imposed on mineral exploration and exploitation until evidence from scientific research on the environmental consequences of such activities proves to the contrary.

ECO further recommends that a fundamental tenet in these early negotiation stages remain that of a commitment to environmental protection by inviting research about the Antarctic, aimed at understanding the environmental effects of mineral resource activities on Antarctic wildlife and ecosystems.

SCIENTIFIC RESEARCH
DATA CENTRE

Scientific research and the establishment of a data centre is the key to understanding the Antarctic ecosystem. It should aim to determine whether or not resource operations are acceptable.

To date, there has been little research into how Antarctic ecosystems "work." Our knowledge of them, especially in terms of the short and long term environmental impacts of mineral activities, is particularly limited.

Thus, a research relationship between the new CCAMLR convention and a future Minerals Regime needs to be seriously considered.

In fact, much of the data collected by the Scientific Committee under CCAMLR will be directly relevant to future mineral negotiations. Facilities for the CMRLR Commission may also be shared by a Scientific Committee for any Minerals Regime and future minerals negotiations.

ECO thus recommends that a comprehensive research programme should be developed in concert with appropriate international and intergovernmental agencies, and non-governmental organisations. This research programme should be designed to answer the key questions necessary to resolve questions about both commercial fishing and minerals activities.

It should be funded at a level which gives vital information for proper decision-making.

A centralised data centre should be established to collect and analyse all data important for sound decisions. This centre should serve the needs of all regional conventions and the biomass programme.

ECONOMIC AND POLITICAL CONSIDERATIONS

It will be extremely expensive to extract minerals from Antarctica, nor will the Scientific Committee under CCAMLR will be directly relevant to future mineral negotiations. Facilities for the CMRLR Commission may also be shared by a Scientific Committee for any Minerals Regime and future minerals negotiations.

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the harsh conditions be an advantage in recruiting labour.

Because of the climate, there will only be a very short season when operations can take place.

Travel costs for tankers moving oil around the world will be enormous and the establishment of rigs, pipelines, storage tanks, onshore and off-shore facilities for staff, and adherence to strict environmental standards (presumably to be imposed), will all boost the price of oil extraction.

Considering the current economic recession and the present absolute glut of oil, the world price of oil would need to rise dramatically to make oil exploration in Antarctica commercially feasible. There are still many other regions in the world where oil and other minerals can be found in large quantities, under more favourable conditions.

In ECO's view, the political differences regarding exploitation will be very difficult to resolve; the costs of protection may well prove prohibitive and the environmental consequences only disastrous.

We suggest that a sensible alternative is to declare the Antarctic a protected permanent wilderness.

This option should not be seen as an extreme solution, but rather one which is workable and in the long-term interests of both the human community and the planet as a whole.

Beyond the obvious environmental advantage which such a choice would offer, it also presents a workable proposal to resolve the tricky issue of both conflicting sovereignty claims and non-recognition counter claims.

Mr Muldoon asked RSA members whether they had given any thought "to the manner in which the morale of your nation is being undermined, both overtly and covertly". He said that the victories of the Second World War had resulted in the freedom to dissent and protest in the Western world, but that because "huffy disputes" are not settled by conciliation great inconvenience and hardship are being caused to large numbers of people.

And... wait for it... "the rule of law is being flouted right and left". This, from the government that is proposing to introduce special legislation to override the High Court's decision so that uninterrupted construction on the Clyde dam can continue must be the ultimate in satire.

The evidence for this can be sourced in a United States Geological Survey published in 1979. It estimated that the Argentinian continental shelf generally had the potential to hold 40 - 200 billion barrels of recoverable oil in five sedimentary basins, including the Malvinas basin.

Such information has led to optimistic speculation that the Malvinas basin had the potential of becoming one of the world's last major hydrocarbon provinces. Since then however, more sobering assessments have been advanced.

Esso, which has been drilling in the western part of the Malvinas basin - about 100 - 125 miles offshore Argentina, has turned up two non-commercial hydrocarbon discoveries.

Total Deninex, drilling closer to the Argentinian coast than Esso, has made four hydrocarbon discoveries of which three were gas, and the fourth oil and gas. It still has to determine their economic feasibility.

Shell is also in the midst of a 17 well drilling programme and has made one discovery. The British government has said that the area was unlikely to contain commercial deposits of hydrocarbons.

A major consideration of course in this assessment is that the notoriously unpredictable weather conditions in the area would pose the need for billions of dollars of investment at a time when sagging world oil prices are forcing the industry to scale back spending.

In spite of this, the oil glut cannot persist indefinitely, and future conditions of oil scarcity can only improve the commercial potential of the region.

Sovereignty claims over the region now, where discoveries are proven, can only ensure the economic health of the sovereign-claiming state in the future.
Cooper Somewhere Over the Rainbow

In his opening address to Treaty delegates, NZ's Minister of Foreign Affairs, Warren Cooper, stressed repeatedly the urgency of a political settlement for Antarctic exploitation.

He warned that the conference venue, the Legislative Chamber, was once the upper house of NZ's parliament, and noted for its obstructionist tactics in the promulgation of law.

He did not add that the lack of progress at the first Antarctic Marine Living Resources meeting in Hobart does not bode well for the Minerals meeting. According to one European delegate the AMLR meeting was "a farce, pathetic and ridiculous", with days wasted on merely procedural matters. The issues involved in the Marine Resources regime, moreover, were less complex or controversial than those facing the present conference, as the tricky business of territorial claims cannot be avoided.

The Minister saw nothing incongruous in the conference "drawing up precise, effective and enforceable rules to protect the environment", when our understanding of the sensitivities of the Antarctic continent to the impact of mining is "very incomplete!"

The conference was deciding the future of an entire continent, he said candidly, with only a "limited background of knowledge".

Yet it has been more than ten years since the questions of minerals exploitation and the likely consequences were first discussed by the Treaty nations, and we have still to hear them call for, and fund, the necessary scientific research in answer.

Delegates were also led to believe that the Treaty nations of Antarctica, had already accomplished a great deal for the protection of the environment, and that proven they were "able to deal effectively with resource issues". But their duties, until recently, have been relatively light, and the issues at stake uncontroversial.

Even then, Treaty deliberations moved at two speeds only - slow and very slow. The major item of environmental restraint, the agreed measures for protection of Antarctic Flora and Fauna, had remained unratified since 1964, operating only in an ad hoc way.

It is a mystery how Mr Cooper can see the AMLR Convention as a healthy precedent for the current negotiations. Its cumbersome procedures and weak provisions for scientific input suggest little hope for a sound minerals regime.

Despite a professed concern for environmental protection, there is no doubt that the focus of the prolonged negotiations to follow will be political rather than scientific, and the "very large reservoir ... of political and legal ingenuity" that Cooper referred to will be drained to the limit in confronting the difficulties of sovereignty.

With AMLR as a case in point, the great danger is that provisions for environmental protection will be thoroughly neutered for political ends.

The Good Oil

A Bargain at $10,000

Commercial interest in the mineral and oil resource potential of Antarctica has already surfaced in the form of expensive documentation which seeks to excite further exploration and development.

One such report, prepared over two years by a firm based in Surrey, England, provides a comprehensive survey of the geology, meteorology, geomorphology and oceanography of the Antarctic region, drawing on more than 1100 references.

The firm, JEBCO, has said that the report would be "a useful manual for companies with a long-term view of exploitation in Antarctica."

The report's two volumes cost $10,000 (U.S.) each and according to the firm's director, Peter Dolan, "only twelve to fifteen" copies have been sold since it was issued in 1980. Most of the buyers have been oil companies, although there has been considerable interest from mining companies as well.

The report has been designed to provide a basic reference of petroleum geology, previous exploration, geopolitics, meteorology and oceanography of Antarctica and its surroundings. To interpret the fill and configuration of the sedimentary basins of Antarctica, the evolution of the spatial relationships of the southern continents is critical. Consequently, the report also considers the geology of Australia, India, Southern Africa, South America and the ocean areas around Antarctica.

The report contains:

1. 360 page text of 5 chapters and references.
2. 19 enclosures, including 13 coloured lithopaleogeographic maps (1:40,000,000)
3. 52 page size figures.
4. 6 page size tabulations.

The report is now available. For further information, please contact:

Peter Dolan
JEBCO
68 High Street
Weybridge, Surrey
KT13 8BL, England
Tel: 8955025 JEBCO G

Antarctica is the largest remaining area of the world's continental surface (14 x 10^6 sq kms) which is relatively unexplored for hydrocarbons.

JEBCO has spent two years studying and interpreting over 1100 references to produce an up to date assessment of the petroleum potential of Antarctica.

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Volume One of the report has been compiled from existing data known at mid-1979, and did not include any primary research done by JEBCO. The major data source has come through a petroleum geologists consultants' group, drawing on a technical data base in Oklahoma. The report has also added to the known data from drilling tests with the construction of a model of the geological structure of Antarctica inferred from the geology of neighbouring continents Australia, South America, Southern Africa and India. It also identifies three basins in the Antarctic region as having the most promising hydrocarbon potential.

Mr Dolan does admit that the present data is insufficient for a conclusive picture of the commercial oil potential of Antarctic waters, and believes that an oil industry in Antarctica would not be feasible for at least ten to fifteen years.