Sir Peter Scott on 27 January 1988 wrote this eloquent appeal for the extension of a moratorium on minerals activities in the Antarctic until well into the next century, in a letter to Dr. Swaminathan, the IUCN President. ECO believes that this would give ample time for the creation of an Antarctic Conservation Strategy, as suggested by the IUCN, which must be in place well before the Minerals Convention comes into force.

As alluded to in the next article, ECO believes that the moratorium should be stronger than the provisions in Recommendation IX-1. Sir Peter’s letter follows:

"The Antarctic Treaty has, for the most part, done a remarkably good job. I hope that its environmental provisions can be strengthened and that it will continue in operation far into the future. I hope, however, that the Treaty Parties will have the wisdom to pull back from the authorisation of mining and oil exploitation which they are contemplating.

"I am deeply concerned that the imminent completion of the Antarctic Minerals Convention, however apparently well-intentioned it may seem to be, will prove to be a disastrous step not only for the Antarctic but for the whole world...

"We do not know how much oil, gold, uranium or other minerals there may be buried under the ice in the Antarctic. What we can say with certainty is that such deposits are finite. The Antarctic Treaty Consultative Parties are therefore considering taking the most appalling risks with the environment of the most unpolluted part of the earth, simply for the sake of a few short years’ supply of these resources...

"In my view, Antarctica stands at a crossroads. If the Minerals Convention is signed and brought into effect in its present form, it will mean that human greed, the desire for short term profit, the urge to conquer new frontiers at whatever cost to the environment, will have triumphed yet again. It will mean that the devastation mankind has wrought over virtually the whole of the rest of the globe is likely to spread to the last wilderness - the last great bastion of silence, of purity, of still huge undisturbed wildlife populations, of international scientific co-operation. If we take the other road, and the Convention is not signed, or is modified so as to allow the current moratorium on mineral resources activity to continue well into the next century, then at the very least we will have gained time in which to reflect further, and perhaps become wiser.

"Wilderness is not a renewable resource. It is only sustainable if we tread with the lightest of steps. Antarctica represents the last chance we have of proving that we really will change our ways and begin living in harmony with our planet. In my view this is a challenge which IUCN must take up."
Bind the Moratorium
One Gap is Filled, But Another is Created

ECO understands that the ATCPs have decided to extend Recommendation IX-1 in the Final Act of the negotiations. The Recommendation included an agreement by the ATCPs to "urge" their nationals to refrain from undertaking minerals activity while "timely progress" was made towards a Minerals Convention. Timely progress has indeed been made, and a Convention is imminent. If a Convention is agreed, there is no reason why the Parties cannot make a stronger Recommendation and undertake absolutely not to carry out minerals activities until the Convention comes into force.

A new Recommendation should therefore be drafted to reflect this new set of circumstances. Otherwise, the good faith of the negotiators is called into question.

Convention Languages
A Problem, In a Manner of Speaking

If anyone in the distant future were to look back at this session of minerals negotiations to find which issues were priorities, they would hardly believe what they found. One of the very difficult problems to be solved appears to be the matter of language. How many should there be and which ones?

CONTINENT AT STAKE

Important items such as provisions for environmental protection of an extremely fragile area against the ravages of minerals exploitation are what the negotiations should be about. Instead, discussion on whether there should be four, five, or more authentic languages takes up valuable time which should have been used for consideration of more important issues.

How will it be possible in future to justify the fact that the Convention has weak, and in some cases, nonexistent, environmental protection provisions in most stages of minerals activities? It is not true that the Treaty parties did not have time to solve these problems.

The whole question reminds us of our kindergarten days. If one child received an apple, the rest insisted on getting one too, or else they would throw a tantrum.

New Zealand would have to insist that the Convention be translated into Maori. And surely, the French would insist that the Tahitian and Kanak languages be included. It would only be a matter of time before Australia also insisted on the Aboriginal language, Pijanjara.

Then there's an array of northern hemisphere languages! As negotiators representing their various populations, it is only fair that the delegates insist that their people be able to read and understand clearly that their right to exploit Antarctica is assured!

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