Greenpeace New Zealand Antarctic campaigner, Carol Stewart, recently visited the Antarctic Peninsula region with the Greenpeace Antarctic expedition. She reports here on her feelings on the state of the local environment. A full report on the expedition will probably be presented to the SCAR meeting later this year, and will also be circulated to all Treaty States.

As the meeting continues to debate the future of Antarctic minerals, it is timely to consider the effects of existing human activities on this unique continent.

ECO is frequently assured that the delegates' primary concern is to protect Antarctica and to maintain the high standards they have set for those undertaking scientific work there. Unfortunately, the reality of living and working on the ice raises many concerns.

The 1987-88 Greenpeace Antarctic Expedition undertook a survey of bases in the Ross Sea area and the South Shetland Islands. The results of that survey were disturbing, to say the least.

The most persistent offenders appear to be the "old hands" - the nations such as the United Kingdom, the United States, Chile and the USSR, which have had a presence in Antarctica for a number of years. After nearly 30 years, there have been few obvious changes to correct their early mistakes in base design and operation. They seem to be content to leave it to smaller and less "developed" countries to show the way. The Argentine, Chinese, Uruguayan, New Zealand and French bases also display a disregard for sound environmental practices in a variety of ways.

Whilst there are no perfect scores for base management, some of the "newer" countries in Antarctica - for example, Brazil, the Republic of Korea, Italy, Spain and Poland - have incorporated some protective measures in their base design and operation.

Where many of the bases lose points is in the lack of understanding by personnel of the Agreed Measures and the Code of Conduct by personnel. The lack of clear direction from national Antarctic authorities thereby contributes to damage of the environment. In several cases, the Officer-in-Charge had discretion over the waste disposal practices on the base. While this was environmentally advantageous in instances where an officer required good practices, in others the discretion has been abused.

Among the unsound practices uncovered by the Greenpeace inspection were:

* fuel left in corroding drums near areas frequented by wildlife. The environs of the abandoned British base on Deception Island were the most obvious example. Fuel was decanted into other
drums by the Greenpeace personnel and stored in the nearby hangar.

* waste metal strewn about, either by wind or human thoughtlessness. This was most noticeable at Bellingshausen (USSR), Arturo Prat (Chile), Teniente Camara (Argentina), Great Wall (China), and McMurdo and Palmer (USA).

* sewage and liquid wastes, including in some cases chemicals from photo laboratories, being released directly into the marine environment. Among the worst offenders here were Great Wall (China), Jubany (Argentina), Teniente Marsh (Chile), Dumont d’Urville (France, visited in 1987), Scott (New Zealand), Faraday (United Kingdom), Artigas (Uruguay) and McMurdo and Palmer (USA).

* foodscraps being stored in the open where birds soon develop the habit of scavenging. Offenders here included Jubany (Argentina), Juan Carlos (Spain) and Bellingshausen (USSR).

* garbage dumps and open fire sites have been established and areas are strewn with partially burned cans, paper, wood, glass, plastics, old furniture and myriad other items. Some bases push this unsightly mess over the sides of small rises or hills to make room for the next batch of "fuel" for the fires. Old batteries were also found abandoned. Two bases, Great Wall (China) and Teniente Marsh (Chile) had filled melt lakes, which had previously been part of an SPA, with garbage.

* to make room for expansion of a base, an airstrip, or even a football field, the local landscape has undergone "re-arrangement" by bulldozer. The worst instance of this was at Ardley Island, formerly part of an SPA, where substantial modification - including construction of a causeway to the Fildes Peninsula - has been undertaken to enable materials to be gathered for the expansion of the airstrip at Teniente Marsh (Chile).

The very states which allow, and in some cases, advocate the practices described above, are the same ones which insist that the regime they are about to conclude can protect the environment and control the activities of multinational mining companies and their employees. ECO submits, however, that if people who are in the Antarctic for scientific and research reasons do not adhere to sound environmental practices to prevent damage to their surroundings, then it is highly unlikely that mining companies will be ready to adhere to the letter of environmental controls.

Not only do these facts provide a good reason for reassessing the present negotiations, but also they show that a new Code of Conduct for waste disposal needs to be negotiated with great urgency. ECO submits that a good way to put the years of negotiations to good use is to really think of protecting the environment and use the goodwill engendered amongst the 38 countries involved in the negotiations to devise a protection regime - whether it be an Antarctic Treaty Park, World Park, World Heritage or some other name.