ANTARCTICA AT THE CROSSROADS

The fifteenth meeting of the Antarctic Treaty Consultative Parties opens today. On its agenda are several items relating to the protection of the Antarctic environment, something which is of major importance not only to those countries attending this meeting, but to all nations.

In 1989, Antarctica is at a crossroads. We must choose between two paths; we cannot go both ways. Either Antarctica will become the last continent to be exploited of its mineral riches, or it will become the first to be protected, in perpetuity, for its wilderness values.

More specifically, we must choose between bringing the Antarctic Minerals Convention into force, or abandoning it in favor of negotiating a new environmental protection convention for the region. This is something the Antarctic Treaty States will discuss during the next two weeks.

We face increasingly global threats to our environment -- such as the "greenhouse effect" and destruction of the earth's protective ozone layer -- whose effects we can hope to stem but no longer to reverse. The issues at this meeting however concern a fragile, as yet unexploited and relatively unpolluted region. This meeting gives us all, concerned citizens of an international community, a seminal opportunity to act firmly and in unison to prevent problems before they appear. We cannot afford to let this opportunity pass us by.

We call on the member states of the Antarctic Treaty, indeed all nations of the world, to take the first unambiguous steps toward safeguarding this environment. We ask them to discard the Antarctic Minerals Convention and begin immediate negotiations to forever preserve the Antarctic environment.

H.H. Prince Sadruddin Aga Khan

David McTaggart
Chairman, Greenpeace International

Professor Arne Naess
University of Oslo

Charles de Haes
Director General, WWF-World Wide Fund For Nature
ECO welcomes delegates to the fifteenth Antarctic Treaty Consultative Meeting. There is much work to be done during the two weeks of the meeting.

ECO is aware of four proposals on the table regarding comprehensive environmental protection, by Australia and France, Chile, New Zealand, and the USA. During the next two weeks NGO representatives in Paris will analyse these proposals and make recommendations to ensure that the Antarctic environment will be fully protected. (If there are other proposals about which ECO is unaware, we would appreciate receiving copies as soon as possible.)

Chile

At the Preparatory meeting in May, Chile presented an information paper calling for the negotiation of Comprehensive Measures for the protection of the Antarctic environment. A working paper later was circulated calling for the convening of a Special Consultative Meeting for this purpose. The proposal embraces existing agreements and Conventions, and suggests that the Comprehensive Measures would be designed to improve the existing framework and "perfect the existing provisions."

Chile suggests that work on the Comprehensive Measures start in 1990. It believes that much can be done at ATCM XV to "begin the process by considering a collection of principles and general rules applicable to all activities in Antarctica." It also advocates that the Recommendation calling for the Special Consultative Meeting include appropriate chapters for the new Comprehensive Measures.

New Zealand

New Zealand's Working Paper was produced following the circulation of the Government's "White Paper" on the Antarctic environment. The paper calls for a "further" Consultative Meeting in 1990 to "consider detailed measures of environmental protection for Antarctica within an integrated framework." It envisages a consistent set of standards governing all human activities, and recommends that ATCM XV establish basic principles of environmental protection to set the agenda for the 1990 meeting. The paper lists a number of environmental considerations that should be covered by these principles. It suggests new institutions that would facilitate protection of the environment.

NZ apparently does not foresee the negotiation of a single regime which would encompass all environmental issues. Rather, it would "build on and strengthen" existing elements of the Antarctic Treaty System. The paper picks up some ideas from CRAMRA, such as institutional inspections, which would be applied to other activities.

United States

The US Working Paper emphasises three areas of consideration in an environmental protection regime. These are: effective standards and procedures applicable to all activities, clear and enforceable obligations, and mechanisms to ensure effective and consistent implementation. It is clear, however, that the US views the existing system of the Treaty, including separate agreements, measures and recommendations, as constituting THE environmental protection regime. The US does not support a new environmental protection convention.

Like New Zealand, the US would have the Treaty Parties identify and fill the gaps in the present Treaty System by clarifying and strengthening existing agreements, and by integrating and making consistent the various
guidelines and regulations. Precisely how this would be accomplished, and over what time period, is not discussed. The US paper assumes that the acceptability and control of mineral resource activities will be carried out pursuant to CRAMRA.

Both the US and New Zealand view environmental monitoring as a high priority in any environmental regime. The US paper does not explicitly envisage any special or further Consultative Meeting to deal with these issues, but proposes that steps be taken at XV ATCM, to be continued at XVI ATCM in 1991. ECO understands, however, that the US will support a Special Consultative Meeting on environmental issues.

Australia/France

This joint proposal calls for the negotiation of a Comprehensive Environmental Protection Convention, and establishment of an Antarctic Wilderness Park. It notes the gaps and inconsistencies within the Antarctic Treaty System resulting from an evolutionary approach to environmental protection, and suggests that the negotiation of a new convention is a "logical next step" for the ATS.

The paper sets out principles and standards to be embodied in the regime, drawing upon existing agreements for their content, but also including activities not presently regulated. Australia and France would not attempt to renegotiate existing Conventions, but suggest that their limitations should be addressed by the new regime. The two countries propose that a Special Consultative Meeting be convened beginning in 1990 for these negotiations.

Australia has publicly stated that mining would not be permitted within the Wilderness Park, and that CRAMRA would not be a part of the new conservation regime or the ATS.

ECO welcomes the ATCPs' growing awareness of the need for new measures and procedures to ensure the "comprehensive protection" of the Antarctic environment. This is a landmark meeting of the Antarctic Treaty. There is much work to be done during this meeting, which should result in concrete steps being taken on issues such as waste disposal, creation of a new type of large protected area, establishment of an emergency response capability to deal with oil spills, and preparation of agreed navigation charts. The governments can set the stage for a concerted effort to fill the serious gaps in the Treaty System, by agreeing on a Special Consultative Meeting in 1990.

ECO will be watching these developments hopefully. We are not interested in more hot air and hollow words. The time has come to prohibit truly harmful activities, to set out clear and legally enforceable standards that apply to all activities, and to create appropriate mechanisms to ensure that there is compliance with and enforcement of all environmental obligations.
International consensus on the Minerals Convention (CRAMRA) has collapsed. With so many Consultative Parties having second thoughts, it is unlikely to come into force. Australia has announced it will not sign CRAMRA and France has supported a ban on mining in the Antarctic. Belgian Foreign Minister Eyskens has stated that he will not submit CRAMRA to the Government, let alone to Parliament, for ratification while the idea of creating an Antarctic world nature reserve is being explored. This follows an anti-mining bill passed by Belgium last May. Now the Italian Parliament, with Government support, has voted not to sign or ratify CRAMRA, and to actively pursue negotiations for an Antarctic World Park.

Other states also are reconsidering their positions. In the US a bipartisan group of influential Senators has submitted to the Senate a Resolution calling for a moratorium on minerals activities and the negotiation of a new agreement among the ATCPs for the full protection of Antarctica as a global ecological commons.

The ATCPs that negotiated CRAMRA established a test for its acceptance. A complicated formula was established to ensure that the Convention could only come into force if all interests had been satisfied - claimants, non-claimants, the superpowers, developing countries, potential miners and those interested in protecting the environment. CRAMRA has failed that test, primarily because environmental interests are not satisfied. Not only have two claimant states effectively cast veto votes, but CRAMRA is unlikely to receive the required 16 ratifications necessary to bring it into force.

ECO will present a detailed report on the status of international support for CRAMRA (or lack thereof) in an upcoming edition. ECO welcomes the awakening of understanding by heads of state and other officials that the intrinsic value to the world community of Antarctica being maintained as a science and wilderness reserve far exceeds any benefit that might be obtained by industrialisation. Given the perilous state of the global environment, this is a time for courage and vision at the highest levels. ECO urges all members of the Antarctic Treaty to consider the benefits of supporting the Australian and French proposals.