SMALL ROOMS

There are periods in any international meeting when the scene shifts from the floor of the working sessions to closed rooms. ECO knows that ATCMs have always worked like this too. However, this meeting has seen more, and earlier, recourse to closed-door sessions than any we have recently observed.

When it comes to money, whether related to the Liability discussions or the Antarctic Treaty Secretariat (where some naughty states still haven’t coughed up their voluntary contributions), we aren’t surprised to see people scuttling into rooms with furrowed brows and calculators.

But it seems that just about anything these days can get you into a small (fortunately for ATCM demographics, no longer smoke-filled) room. The tourism discussions here in Cape Town have been almost entirely in small rooms. Which is a shame, because our hosts have provided us with some very nice large rooms and paid quite a lot of money for all those translators.

What seems to be happening is that a small subset of Consultative Parties have created the Antarctic Treaty’s very own “Security Council”. Whatever the source or thrust of an idea introduced into the ATCM, its fate is actually determined by this council and its commercial friends. Naturally this is all best done privately, away from the peasants and in English.

The emergence of this de facto council cuts across the increasing Consultative Party membership of the ATS, the opening up of the ATS over the period of the 1980s and early 1990s, and the supposed consensus-based nature of the system. Sure, consensus is still required for anything to be adopted; but the real power has shifted away from the Consultative Parties as a whole (and certainly the vast majority of ATCPs are now often bit-players) to the very few. To ECO it seems depressingly similar to the arrangement in other places.

We hope that Consultative Parties – especially the smaller states, developing nations, those whose native language is not English – have plans to take joint action to reclaim their role in the ATS.

The Economic Globalization of Antarctica Some Years On

ECO has been among the first calling the attention to the effects of globalization on the Antarctic region. At the XXII ATCM in Tromso (1998) ECO posed the question of whether or not Antarctica could resist the pressures of economic globalization. We warned about the potential effects of global economic forces reaching the Antarctic region and its system of governance. Time and space are shrinking, and the effects are beginning to be felt in the hitherto remote Antarctic region.

ECO thinks that it is now time to revisit this issue and assess what has happened on the intervening years.

There are currently two main commercial activities in the Antarctic region – fisheries and tourism. The bioprospecting industry is emerging strongly, and other industries may appear afterwards. With significant differences concerning their focus, modus operandi and scale the current Antarctic industries develop in an uneasy balance, and sometimes in tension, with the priorities of science and comprehensive environmental protection that are fundamental to the Antarctic Treaty and its Protocol.

In the fishing front the legal industry has continued to grow. It has also become highly influential in CCAMLR and remains unwilling to reduce its annual quota despite some marine ecosystems being under stress from the cumulative effects of legal and illegal
fishing. CCAMLR in turn rules supreme over its poor cousin, the Protocol, particularly in what concerns Annexes II, IV and V (Annex I not applying to fishing activities).

Since 1998 the tourism industry has expanded considerably – in terms of tourist numbers, operator numbers, types of activities, etc. It has also become considerable influential in Antarctic circles.

Bioprospecting is also a growing industry. We already know of several patents of Antarctic micro-organisms. So far, we have not seen industry representatives at the ATCM. We expect them to appear as soon as they get wind that ATCPs are interested in a greater scrutiny of their activities or in regulating the industry.

Might there be a familiar pattern here? – An expanding global industry; industry representation in the Antarctica fora; ever growing influence on the norms of the fora? And alongside this, the intrinsic values of the Antarctic region, and fundamental values of the ATS, such as international cooperation, increasingly under challenge.

ECO recognises that globalization is a complex issue. Absolute globalisation or anti-globalisation postures are usually meaningless without the context of what or who benefits from it or otherwise. There are positive aspects of globalization and in the Antarctic context the Antarctic Treaty System itself is one of them (although increasingly it appears to work not so much as a system but as a dysfunctional set of parts). Globalization has also negative aspects, which in the Antarctic case could be the transformation from a protected wilderness devoted to peace and science into a place not greatly different to any other on earth – a source of natural resources, a fashionable “destination”. We see different forms of inequality emerging across the ATS which mimic those of the broader world.

The flip side of the globalization debate is that greater global interconnectedness works both ways. The world is turning to Antarctica, and at the same time Antarctica is closer to the rest of the planet than what it has been ever before. Global corporations may have a growing interest in Antarctic resources – and this spells trouble for Antarctica – but those who are now opposing burger chains may one day become interested on the commercialisation of the Antarctic wilderness.

End of Denial

ECO is pleased to find that in the face of a seemingly endless and rapid growth and expansion of Antarctic tourism, there is now a sense of urgency among some who, until recently, denied that there was any particular trend in the development of the industry, that this constituted a problem at all, or that the problem was only Adventure Tourism: “As we all agreed” (did we?). Now it is not only apparently accepted that too much, too fast, is happening on the tourism front; we even begin to mention the “precautionary approach” (previously despised by many and applied by few). We are even urged to take precautionary action now.

ECO supports the use of the precautionary approach when this results in tangible measures to protect the Antarctic environment or its intrinsic values. For instance, the precautionary approach can be applied to prevent impacts from a certain activity, with measures such as the temporary or permanent suspension or cancellation of the activities. Such precautionary measures can be put into action ahead of having monitoring results about the potential impact of an activity, which might come too late (or be inconclusive enough) to ensure the protection of the environment. Will it be ever be accepted that we have positively detected impacts resulting from tourism from the background of natural variability, climate change, etc?

We are not keen on using the notion of “precautionary approach” only to make a proposal look good, but otherwise without practical effects.

Nevertheless, we are willing to give the benefit of the doubt to the tourism industry and its friends. We are pleased that it has eventually recognized that the patterns of tourism development are a cause of concern, despite whatever self-regulation is in place, and that the precautionary approach is now accepted as a valid alternative in the environmental management tool box. ECO hopes that now that we recognise the challenges of a growing tourism industry the precautionary approach will be put to use in a meaningful way.

ECO
Number 3
4 June 2004 Cape Town

Production Team: Phandulwazi Moses, Marion de Wit, Maximiliano Muñoz, Roberto Benvenuto, Zanne Roberts, Sebastian Swift & Saskia de Vries.

ECO is published by Friends of the Earth and others at international environmental meetings. This volume is a joint project of the Antarctic and Southern Ocean Coalition, Friends of the Earth International, World Wide Fund for Nature International and The Antarctica Project.

The Editorial Office is at the Breakwater Lodge, Waterfront, Cape Town.

ECO is financed from non-governmental sources. ECO’s role is to provide ideas and alternative proposals to the delegates to intergovernmental meetings, report on the meetings, inform the public in order to generate wide-ranging debate, and to clarify the issues for the media.