Welcome to Sofia
Добре дошли в София

ECO is delighted to welcome delegates to Sofia. The pleasant climate already has us in a good mood.

THE PROTOCOL’S SILVER ANNIVERSARY

As we commence the 38th ATCM, ECO notes the upcoming 25th anniversary of the Environmental Protocol. In addition to wondering what kind of silver, the traditional 25th anniversary gift, that we should get the Antarctic Treaty System (ATS), ECO also wants to reflect on how the Protocol is performing.

Norway, United Kingdom, Australia, Chile, France, and New Zealand have proposed a symposium to commemorate the anniversary. ECO thinks this is a useful idea, but is concerned that the proposal seems to focus mostly on past successes. ECO hopes Treaty Parties take the opportunity to also explore current gaps and future actions and implementation.

Though the Protocol has been a clear success, it is also evident that more work needs to be done to ensure its full and consistent implementation by each and all Parties. The CEP continues to have a lot of work each year, including a full slate of intersessional discussions, on issues ranging from EIA to tourism management. This is not to say that if the implementation were perfect, the CEP would have no further work to do. The CEP will always have a role in making sure that Antarctic Treaty Parties are living up to the Protocol and continue to tackle both cyclical as well as emerging issues.

Nevertheless, it seems that there are quite a lot of outstanding issues that are not being addressed. For instance, a peer-reviewed paper published last year pointed out that Antarctica’s protected areas are “inadequate, unrepresentative, and at risk” (Shaw et al. 2014). The basic analysis of Antarctic biogeographic regions has been done and is widely accepted. It is time to take it one step further and use the information for terrestrial protected area planning. CCAMLR has created planning domains for the whole of the Southern Ocean. Certainly the ATCM does not want to lag behind its sister organization. And with actual marine protected area designation proceeding slowly in CCAMLR to date, the ATCM has a chance to catch up. Both bodies should address marine protection without getting edgy or hyper-sensitive about the potential effect that environmental protection may have on areas protected under these two bodies according to their respective competences. As we all know, protection and harvesting can coexist quite well under the current framework.

Tourism is another important subject. The CEP Tourism Study was completed in 2012. This year several Parties have proposed the adoption of a strategic approach to tourism. If adopted, this could be a positive step forward, but work plans are only useful if they are ambitious, and if they result in actual decisions. If we look at the follow up to the recommendations to the ATME on tourism, there have been follow up WPs and IPs presented, but not much in the way of actual decisions. Actual decisions have almost always followed developments in this very dynamic activity.
There are other important issues such as ensuring that the implementation of Annex I is more than rubberstamping proposals and takes into consideration changes in various activities; Annex VI negotiations on liability; the response to climate change; co-siting of facilities including bases, and remediation of environmental damage. We also highlight that a COMNAP workshop on wastewater management found that compliance with the Protocol may not sufficiently protect the environment. ECO is not sure whether the CEP’s current work plan enables the kind of proactive body that would make addressing all these issues possible.

Most of these actions have a single overall objective, which is the comprehensive protection of the Antarctic environment and its dependent and associated ecosystems, and the intrinsic values of Antarctica. Yet what we have seen in the past 25 years, together with a number of successes, is a steady nibbling effect on wilderness and a steady increase of the human footprint on the region.

In sum, ECO is happy to acknowledge the incredible success of the Protocol, but hopes that the anniversary is a time to recommit to tackling outstanding issues. Onward and upward!

PUBLIC EDUCATION IS GREAT, BUT…

ECO thoroughly enjoyed and welcomed the Sunday presentations on the many public education efforts being undertaken by ATPs, expert and observer organisations. Yet despite a surfeit of interesting and focused outreach projects, it’s unclear what it all adds up to. With a growing number of tools available to help us collaborate and expand on our collective education efforts, all parts of the ATS need to think strategically about their programs. It’s not just whether people attend a workshop, it’s whether they absorbed the information and use it later on.

The need for a better approach is clear. ECO is quite accustomed to seeing news stories about how the Antarctic Treaty “runs out” or “expires” in a few decades. And don’t even mention the stories about how climate change cannot exist because sea ice around Antarctica is increasing or you will give ECO a headache. Delegates know the truth, the question is, how do we get the truth out there?

But outreach is not limited to getting the facts right. We also can inspire the public. Engaging partners such as zoos and aquariums is a good step (of course, Antarctic wildlife kept there would have been born in captivity rather than collected from the wild). With such wonderful existing content and a subject matter so ripe for growing public interest, it should not be difficult to develop a collective effort that brings awareness of and concern for the Antarctica to tens of millions around the world?

Now that the ATCM has turned its attention towards education, we can seize the opportunity to find out what has worked and what has not, and in our own small way contribute to increasing the knowledge of the global community. And take the chance to further educate ourselves in the process.

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