

# Chilean funeral for Antarctic minerals pact?

- Minerals treaty in jeopardy
- Negotiations failure would permit mining

## Paris, London & Washington

ANTARCTIC researchers should be holding their breath this week as the Antarctic Treaty parties gather in Vina del Mar, Chile for a special consultative meeting to resolve wide differences in opinion on how to control exploitation of Antarctic resources. Depending on how the negotiations proceed, the meeting could end with new rules that could restrict several forms of basic research in the earth sciences. Alternatively, if no agreement can be reached, existing restrictions may be voided and mineral exploitation could begin in earnest.

The meeting was called after the breakdown of eight years of negotiations towards a Convention on the Regulation of Antarctic Mineral Resource Activities (CRAMRA), which attempted to set strict rules for any future mineral exploitation. Although the convention was adopted in June 1988, it was not ratified by the required 16 nations, and so did not enter into force.

Ratification now seems politically impossible, given the refusal of France and Australia to accept any kind of mining activity in Antarctica.

France and Australia will present to the meeting a controversial alternative, co-sponsored by Belgium and Italy, that Antarctica be declared a 'natural reserve' and 'land of science'. The proposal prohibits all mineral resource exploration and exploitation and recommends principles to evaluate the environmental impact of activities, ranging from those to be banned to those with low risk. Formal bodies would be created to oversee the protection of the environment.

The problem for scientists is how the search for mineral resources can be separated from legitimate scientific research. A French foreign ministry spokeswoman says that proposals would be judged "on a case-by-case basis".

But Peter Barker, a geophysicist with the British Antarctic Survey, says he has misgivings about the criteria that would be used to review research proposals. "A pseudo-scientific view of environmental relevance is not a suitable criterion" by which to judge Antarctic research. Rather, he believes that the primary decision should be based on peer review, followed by an independent assessment of the environmental impact.

As examples of work that may suffer, Barker cites seismic reflection, and magnetic and gravitational surveys to investi-

gate the excellent examples of subduction zones found in the Antarctic. Although such research is fundamental to the understanding of plate tectonics, the data would also be useful to the oil industry. Visits by drill ships might also be restricted, he fears, even though drilling

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Flying the flag around the South Pole.

Antarctic sediments could provide information on glaciation that would be useful for climate research.

To improve environmental protection, Britain will suggest that a new protocol be added to the existing Antarctic treaty, with specific provisions to deal with wildlife conservation, waste disposal, marine pollution, environmental impact assessments for scientific work, tourism, prospecting and so on.

John Heap, who earned his doctorate in Antarctica and will lead the UK Foreign Office team this week, regards this approach as better than an "overarching idea" on the general principle of environmental protection. 'wilderness park' or 'land of science' proposals are little more than labels, he says, and the British team "doesn't see much virtue in labels. We're concerned about protecting the Antarctic environment".

Environmental groups take a much more positive view of the French-Australian proposal. Simon Lyster, British representative of the World Wide Fund for Nature, concedes that the criteria by which scientific research would be judged under the proposal have not been fully worked out. But he says that "there is no intention that environmental protection should exclude scientific research".

Environmental groups' biggest concern is that the meeting should reach a consensus. James Barnes, an attorney for the Antarctic and Southern Ocean Coalition, which represents some 200 environmental groups and has been granted coveted

observer status for the first time this year, says that the key goal is to keep negotiations from disintegrating. An Antarctic Treaty provision calls for voluntary restraint from prospecting only as long as the members are working towards a timely resolution of the mining issue. If negotiations break down, any party could theoretically begin prospecting unhindered, Barnes says.

The British team still argues that the minerals convention is valuable, but seems grudgingly to accept its demise and are approaching the negotiations "with an open mind" on the minerals issue. Above all, the British team says it will strive to

preserve the consensus that has kept territorial claims to the Antarctic in abeyance since the Antarctic Treaty came into effect in 1961. "Otherwise, the future of scientific cooperation is put at risk" says Heap.

The United States also now regards the proposed mineral convention as dead, helped by pressure from Congress, which in October passed bills call-

ing for a wilderness park and prohibiting US nationals and corporations from mineral resource activities in the Antarctic. The US team has agreed to consider some sort of moratorium on mineral exploitation. Although no length has been specified, State Department officials this month suggested 30 years as a figure that is neither too short to be meaningful nor too long to lock the treaty nations into a decision they might someday regret.

Scientific research within the continent is not without its problems. Barnes says that the Antarctic and Southern Ocean Coalition's immediate goal is a system that "makes more rational decisions on where to build bases." As treaty nation status depends on a member maintaining a full-time scientific base anywhere in the Antarctic, some 10 bases have sprouted up on King George Island, the most accessible and temperate land in the region. "It's easy to establish a claim, but they'll soon run out of science to do there," he says.

UK and US scientists also share the view that there is duplication of work in the Antarctic and that some of the bases achieve little. One solution might be to end the requirement of a year-round base to gain voting rights. Some other criterion, such as possession of a research vessel, could encourage more international collaboration. And on one issue scientists and environmentalists are united: the most immediate threat to the environment is not mineral exploitation but burgeoning tourism.

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