An international expedition has revealed jagged mountain ranges (left) under the Antarctic ice.

BAS

depth are “quite contorted”, says Ferraccioli. That’s not good news for those looking to drill unaltered ice layers to search for gas bubbles and other climate records from the past.

Meanwhile, AGAP’s seismology team has deployed 24 seismological stations on the ice sheet above the Gamburtsevs. “This is the first time that there’s been an array of stations in the middle of Antarctica that have run successfully all year long,” says Douglas Wiens of Washington University in St Louis, Missouri, the team’s co-leader. The stations have been gathering data on the subsurface structure by measuring seismic waves from large earthquakes, such as the Szechuan quake of May 2008, which pass through the Gamburtsevs on their way to the top of the ice sheet.

The seismic work was one of the few projects not affected by the funding shortages that have plagued polar research projects in recent years. The unrelated POLNET project, for instance, had to dramatically scale back the number of seismic and global positioning system stations it planned to install around Antarctica in the most recent field season. And in AGAP, the airborne survey had to cut back on its planned number of flights by about 20%, says Bell.

Still, she says, the Gamburtsev project wouldn’t have happened any other way. “The framework of the IPY,” she says, “really let us launch a major expedition in the most difficult place to work.”

Alexandra Witze

See Editorial, page 1057.

Harbour threat for coelacanths

A population of coelacanths — the rare deepwater fish once thought to have been extinct for millions of years — could be at risk if a proposed harbour project in Tanzania goes ahead, conservation experts warn.

A port development plan, commissioned by the Tanzania Ports Authority, recommends building a deep-water harbour in the shallow Mwambani Bay south of Tanga, a coastal town close to the Kenyan border. The Tanzanian government hopes that the new port, designed to accommodate large container ships, will stimulate economic development in the region.

Plans for such a harbour date back to 1977, but authorities are now moving forwards fast, having designated around 80 hectares of land from which they will have to evict local residents. A Chinese–Tanzanian agreement on economic and technological cooperation, signed last week by the Chinese president Hu Jintao during a state visit to Dar es Salaam, could lend support to the US\$164-million project.

Opponents complain that the local business community, conservation organizations and residents of Mwambani Bay have not been involved

in the planning. Local seafood exporter Eric Allard, who trained in Florida as an oceanographer, says that the existing port in Tanga operates at less than 50% of capacity. “There is no need whatsoever for a new harbour,” he says.

However, environmental activists say that it might be related to plans to build a soda-ash (sodium carbonate) extraction plant 500 kilometres away on the shores of Lake Natron. The plant would be able to produce up to 1 million tonnes of soda ash annually, and the planned new harbour could provide the capability to ship it.

Environmentalists are concerned about potential damage to the local ecosystems. A 2008 technical assessment by the Tanzania Natural Resource Forum (TNRF), a non-governmental environmental organization based

in Arusha, concluded that building a harbour in Mwambani Bay “will probably wipe out the local coelacanth population”.

Coelacanths (*Latimeria chalumnae*) were ‘rediscovered’ in 1938 when a specimen was caught off South Africa. Off Tanzania, the first coelacanth was caught in 2003. Since then, 50 or so catches of coelacanths have been reported by Tanzanian fishermen. Scientists think that the fish are under pressure from fishing with dynamite and the use of deep-set shark nets. A population off the Comoros Islands in the Indian Ocean is now stable thanks to conservation measures initiated almost 20 years ago, says Hans Fricke, a marine biologist with the Leibniz Institute of Marine Sciences in Kiel, Germany. The Tanga population probably consists of strays from the Comoros population, he says.

The species’ small gene pool offers a unique window into the history of life on Earth, says Mike Bruton, a

consultant with architecture and design company MTE Studios in Cape Town and former director of the J. L. B. Smith Institute of Ichthyology in Grahamstown, South Africa, named after the man who identified the coelacanth in 1938.

“The international

community should take very seriously anything that threatens such an important species,” says Bruton. “Building a harbour right in the middle of a proclaimed preserve will substantially harm underwater habitats.”

Conservation experts are meeting this week in Tanga to discuss options for a Marine Protected Area for coelacanths, which the Tanzanian government promised to create in 2006. Tanzanian law requires that an environmental and social impact assessment be carried out before construction starts. But no such exercise is under way. Tanzania’s National Environmental Management Council recently told the TNRF that it was not involved in the planning, nor was it aware of any impact assessment.

Quirin Schiermeier

Coelacanths are found in Tanzanian waters.

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