

Guest editorial

Waste disposal — expectations and realities

Garbage is on everyone's minds at the moment and no more so than in the Antarctic. Thirty years ago it was publicly, legally and scientifically acceptable to burn plastics, to leave rubbish to fall through the ice and to dump hazardous waste into the sea outside the Treaty area. This is no longer the case and the recent turn round in policy poses a number of problems, especially for those countries with long-established stations.

The acceptance by the last Treaty meeting of all the major SCAR waste disposal recommendations was remarkable. None of the operators can be under any illusions about the difficulties in full compliance with the regulations and yet all the countries undertook to conform. It is to be hoped that conservation groups will recognise the importance of this statement of intent and accept that it cannot be realized overnight throughout the continent. That is not however an excuse for non-compliance.

Accumulated rubbish, both on and offshore, is a feature of many of the older stations. Indeed, deserted stations, field huts and dumps are an important part of the total problem. Whilst some of the waste can be easily retrieved, much presents very difficult logistic problems. Importation of waste into most countries is now an emotive issue and international legislation forbids the dumping at sea of land-generated wastes. Thus, even after reclaiming the wastes in Antarctica the operator may well be left with disposal problems. Resourcing waste disposal is a further challenge. Ideally new money should be provided to do this but many countries are likely to redirect some of their science support into what they see as a pressing political necessity. Thus the very act of clearing up the continent to keep it pristine for science is likely to reduce science funding and divert logistic support.

It is important to recognize the efforts that have already been made. Most of the recent Consultative Parties have established stations that conform to the new regulations whilst others have introduced or are developing much improved waste disposal policies for the older stations. Full implementation of all waste removal must, however, be tempered with pragmatism. We should carefully weigh the environmental costs of removing non-toxic rubbish from remote locations against those of leaving it undisturbed. Let us not also forget that one man's rubbish, when given the acceptable patina of age, is another man's historical artefact!

The twenty two Consultative Parties encompass a wide variety of cultural systems and organisational approaches. It would be unrealistic to assume that all view waste disposal in the same way or that all will be equally eager or capable of implementing the new Recommendations. Of particular concern must be those countries where the military provide logistic support, often with little apparent reference to environmental protection.

A more active role in all aspects of environmental protection is required from the Antarctic science community. They must ensure that operators meet the expected criteria, they must ensure that logistic staff both on and offshore are briefed about how to behave and why, and they must ensure that waste and environmental damage are considered when planning all science activities. If we want to keep the continent clean for our research we must organize ourselves to police it and report infringements – or others will do it for us.

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