

Editorial

The International Polar Year in 2007

Anniversaries punctuate all our lives, providing the semicolons that cause us to pause and think again. Everyone has plenty of personal anniversaries but there are also cultural and institutional ones that we can use as an opportunity to remember but also as a platform to leap forward. How far have we come and where do we want to be in the future? The recent announcement of an International Polar Year (IPY) in 2007 is linked to the fiftieth anniversary of the International Geophysical Year, an event that proved to have such momentous consequences both for Antarctic science and for international politics.

Looking back reminds me that IGY was one of the most important international collaborations in a world then locked into the Cold War. It brought together a tremendous range of scientific talent and linked the Antarctic firmly into the global system for the first time. Its very success provided the impetus for the negotiation of the Antarctic Treaty, an international agreement that has set remarkable standards in co-operation, environmental management and innovative international legal developments. Weathering a range of attacks through the United Nations declaring them to be an unrepresentative private club, the original 12 Consultative Parties have now grown to 27 with another 18 Acceding Parties. These 45 countries now represent around 80% of the world population and have shown remarkable care in their management of the continent and its surrounding seas.

The next IPY comes at a very different moment in global politics from the Cold War. Then the world stood in fear of sudden destruction by nuclear war between the super powers, whereas now we know we are destroying it but much more slowly this time and with apparent inability to slow the ever-increasing pace of global change. Then we knew very little about Antarctica; it was largely Terra Incognita. Now we know a great deal more in many fields and see it more clearly in a global context. Then few people were able to visit the continent. Now we see tourism increasing year on year. The international scientific community and politicians now see the key role that Antarctica plays in Earth System Science and fund it accordingly.

At the other end of the world the Arctic was then heavily militarized as the USSR and the USA bluffed each other for world supremacy. Now the problems in the Arctic are increasing pollution, increasing resource demands and continuing westernisation of native culture. On the positive side there is increasing self-government by aboriginal people, decommissioning of the military sites and the development of pan-Arctic institutions such as the Arctic Council and the International Arctic Science Committee.

So why do we need another IPY? Surely with the new institutions, new government awareness and continued funding for research this is an unnecessary celebration? The short answer is no. Focussing attention on the Polar Regions at a key moment in the development of our more holistic view of the world through Earth System Science should have many advantages and opportunities. We can try to do those things internationally and through co-operation that we cannot do normally. We can reach for new objectives to bring in new expertise to polar science and inspire the next generation of researchers. We can link the two Poles more effectively together. Time is short. The International Steering Committee needs your suggestions now. Where do you think we should be going for the next 50 years?

Let's see if we can make this IPY as important a milestone as the last one and bring the Poles to public attention worldwide!

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