

Editorial

Antarctic Treaty Summit

Human greed - for power or money - is one of the dominating characteristics of our history at both the individual and national scales. It is rare indeed where such forceful drivers have been put aside and an attempt made to reach a mutual understanding for the common good. Politicians and lawyers would say that is what characterizes international law and treaties but others see hidden agendas and lurking nationalism. When we celebrate the 50 years of the Antarctic Treaty we need to have these thoughts in mind as the lessons we can learn may be more mixed than we might expect.

The official celebrations took place in Baltimore earlier this year and, although there was some attempt to link to the public through the media, it was, as always, a closed meeting of officials with restrictive rules. The Antarctic Treaty Summit (www.ats50.aq) in Washington 30 November–2 December 2009 is a very different beast and one that shows signs of breaking new ground in several ways.

First, it is an open meeting for anyone to attend. Unencumbered by the formal management business that was the major part of Baltimore it will range over the last 50 years in much more detail, looking across the whole of the Treaty System with expert speakers able to engage with the audience and see both the good and bad points.

Second, it not only celebrates the actual day of the signing of the Treaty but will establish a new “For Ever” declaration open to public signature from anywhere in the world.

Third, it extends the lessons learned from the purely Antarctic area to other international spaces that continue to need good governance, like the High Seas, the Atmosphere and Outer Space. What lessons can we learn from Antarctica for these and how could the Antarctic Treaty learn from them?

Sadly, some governments see this meeting as unnecessary, even a distraction from the activities in Baltimore, and refuse to become involved. By its very nature it is not a decision-making meeting and that frees the discussion up in a way that rule-bound treaties can never contemplate. Looking across the international treaties must be a useful exercise once in a while and inviting the public to take part in discussions on governance is surely a good thing in a world fixated on democracy? What opportunities for new ideas, free thinking and horizon scanning will be missed by those whose concept of governance is limited to appointed officials and closed meetings!

Where will the Antarctic Treaty be in another 50 years? Where indeed will the human race be if weak politicians fail to act on global change? This meeting will undoubtedly speculate on themes like these and others that the public participants will suggest. Maybe some of the final conclusions will eventually be allowed to penetrate into the closed world of the Antarctic Treaty System and provide a stimulus for change.

Science is fundamental to policy making in the Antarctic, in Outer Space and even in many aspects of the High Seas. The IPCC input on the atmosphere is surely one of the greatest ever effects of science into policy. Yet the science will never be perfect, the risks will never disappear and the policies will need common sense and leadership as well as the facts. International governance of international spaces for the common good was never more needed than now as the prospect of irreversible damage looms large. Perhaps the Antarctic Treaty Summit will provide us with some potential ways forward as well as explaining the achievements of the last 50 years in the world’s largest wilderness.

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