

Editorial

Scanning the horizon

The global recession still colours all of the world's politics. The rapidly rising inequalities in the developed countries, with corruption, cronyism, dogma and self-interest all still remarkably evident amongst the political classes, is paralleled by the usual crop of local and regional conflicts which keeps draining money away from more useful activities. The vista is depressing for investment in science and yet for Antarctica there seems to be a different wind blowing.

Despite the financial problems the UK, Germany and Australia have all announced major investments in new polar research vessels. Meanwhile several Latin American countries are also looking at upgrading their Antarctic vessels. All this capital investment, which has a 25–30 year life, indicates continuing commitments and also appears to coincide with new statements on future activities. The UK has just published its polar strategy for 2014–2020, Australia will publish its new strategy later this year and the National Academy of Sciences in Washington is well on its way to a new American strategy. Other countries are likely to follow suit and publish their own plans for the future.

Into this mix has now been cast the outcomes of the first international Antarctic Science Horizon Scan, organised by the Scientific Committee on Antarctic Research (SCAR) and funded in large part by the Tinker Foundation. A brief summary of the outcomes was published in *Nature* in August and a full account of the process and key themes for the future has just been published in this journal.

SCAR has provided internationally focussed themes for research before, with perhaps the most important early example being the BIOMASS programme that provided the basis for CCAMLR and Southern Ocean fisheries management. There have been other important collaborative programmes since but it was the re-organisation of SCAR in 2004 that gave new impetus to international collaboration on specific topics through the inauguration of its major Antarctic Research Programs.

The outcomes of the Scan cover all areas of science and include policy and social science as well. This first attempt has involved the whole community in contributing what they see as the major questions and then used a selected and representative group of leading scientists to argue this down to a key group of topics, so the results will not suit all agendas. However, one might expect them to have some impact on the key research priorities funded by the Consultative Parties over the next decade, not least because the intellectual input to the final conclusions has been greater than any one country could manage itself.

The inclusion of policy underlines the recognition that even Antarctic research requires more than curiosity as a justification in the 21st century, and that many governments are seeing the Antarctic as a future source of revenue in some form. Informed management continues to be essential to safe guard the future, as is the need for greater collaboration and asset sharing to minimise impacts and maximise outputs. Of the 80 final questions listed it is surely the 23 questions dealing with the global connections of the atmosphere and the Southern Ocean that are the most pressing in our rapidly changing world.

Perhaps the final menu is still too long and needs prioritising to be effective? Ensuring that every Party can find elements to adopt makes for apparent inclusivity but will not provide the degree of focus that many of the questions need to be successfully researched. Working together SCAR and COMNAP can provide the forum for planning and developing the most important new initiatives. What we need now is more political enthusiasm for international co-operation and less for national agendas.

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