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Anniversary in perpetual ice: Germany marks 30 years of efforts to protect the Antarctic

Changing pattern of use of eco-system poses continued challenge for conservation efforts

Germany has been an active participant in conservation efforts in the Antarctic since 3 March 1981, the date it was granted full voting rights in the Antarctic Treaty. This international treaty has regulated the use of the Antarctic environment for strictly peaceful purposes and for scientific research of its perpetual ice since 1961. The Antarctic requires special protection since it is a natural ecosystem as yet largely untouched by man, but of great scientific and aesthetic value. To date, 48 countries have committed to the preservation of the Antarctic. In recent years, use of the area has been on the rise: in addition to research presence, tourism which has increased pressure on its sensitive ecosystem. As many as 37,000 tourists travel to Antarctica during its summer season every year.

For anyone who seeks to start an expedition to the Antarctic from Germany authorisation from the Federal Environment Agency (UBA) must be granted - whether the purpose of the visit is to do research, journalistic reporting, or a ship cruise or other form of individualised tourism. Authorisation is regulated by Germany's Implementation Act to the Protocol on Environmental Protection to the Antarctic Treaty, an additional agreement ratified by the Consultative Parties to the 1998 Antarctic Treaty for the better protection of the Antarctic environment. UBA reviews applications to undertake activity with a special eye to the impact it will have on the local Antarctic environment. It may determine special requirements that must be met or even deny authorisation altogether.

Protection efforts are well worth it for the Antarctic not only has a major impact on global climate developments, it is also an archive of the important eras in the history of the earth and represents significant geological and biological-evolutionary processes. At the same time, the ecosystems of the Antarctic are highly sensitive. Due to the relatively limited diversity of species and the extreme climate, the local biocoenoses are practically unable to adapt to changes in the environment. Hence the necessity of protecting the Antarctic environment more vigilantly than in more temperate climate zones. The signatory states to the Antarctic Treaty have committed to protect and preserve the native biocoenoses, atmosphere, land, aquatic, glacial and marine environments of the Antarctic as the common heritage of all mankind.

The most important activity in the Antarctic is research. Any Parties to the Treaty that undertake substantial research anywhere south of the 60th parallel south assume consultative status; that is, they have decision-making rights as outlined in the Treaty system. Germany maintains various research platforms in the Antarctic, including the Neumayer-Station III of the Alfred Wegener Institute for Polar and Marine Research, which is operated year-round. The station facilities include observatories that do research in meteorology, geophysics and atmospheric chemistry and also serves as the logistics centre for research expeditions.

In addition to Germany, 27 other of the 48 signatory states conduct research in the Antarctic, and whose common objective is to learn more about the sensitive and as yet little known ecosystem there. One focus point of current research is the role that the Antarctic plays in Earth's climate system, which is why the signatory states have focused scientific activities on climate research, glaciology, oceanography, geosciences, and marine biology.

Anyone seeking to travel to the Antarctic, planning a research or reporter's expedition to the Antarctic, or otherwise interested in the area, can find key information here:

<http://www.umweltbundesamt.de/antarktis-e>.

Dessau-Roßlau, 3 March 2011