Environmental monitoring: an international framework

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Summary

Monitoring has since long been identified as key to better assessing possible environmental changes and identifying impacts of human activities, including tourism. Monitoring is also the subject of obligations in the Protocol on environmental protection to the Antarctic Treaty (Environment Protocol, art. 3.2.), and many Parties have included monitoring activities in the National Programs. It is however unlikely that, put together, these national monitoring activities provide a full overview of developments in the Antarctic environment, given the lack of a coherent, spatially explicit framework, the lack of a coordinating mechanism and the lack of adequate resources.

This WP proposes to establish an ICG that will be tasked to develop a proposal for an overall framework for environmental impact monitoring, also taking into account cumulative impacts. It is proposed that the ICG uses important suggestions and elements that have already been identified in recent years. The WP proposes a ToR for the ICG.

Introduction

The Antarctic environment is changing. Drivers of that change include increased human presence and human activities and their impacts, that are exacerbated by climate change, pollution, and so on. Beyond the general finding that the Antarctic environment is changing, much is unknown, including the way in which the environment is changing, as well as the extent of the changes. Environmental monitoring lays the groundwork for better understanding threats and impacts and provides the basis for coherent and comprehensive policy action where needed.

Environmental monitoring is an obligation under the Environment Protocol, and many if not all Parties are undertaking environmental monitoring to some extent. However, these approaches may show differences in terms of research approach (e.g., indicators) and cover only specific geographical areas. An international framework for environmental monitoring is needed, but so far, not in place. Such a framework should not only provide guidance on what to monitor, but also where to monitor, and how. Ideally the framework, following a Driver-Pressure-State-Impact-Response approach (DPSIR-approach), would be able to distinguish different drivers of change, the pressures that stem from them, as well as the impacts on and responses of the Antarctic environment and the effectiveness of policy responses. Additionally, an international monitoring framework appears to be the only way to achieve the objectives of Art. 3.2.c of the Environmental Protocol regarding the consideration of cumulative impacts in the planning and conduct of Antarctic activities.

In recent years, much concern has been expressed around the impacts of tourism, climate change and pollution, and the way in which these factors might interact. In the informal workshop on Antarctic tourism in Rotterdam (2019), the need for the development of an international framework for environmental monitoring, capable of assessing the impacts of tourism as well as the effectiveness of tourism policies was recognized. The subsequent ATCM meeting requested SCAR to develop this framework. To date, that has not yet resulted in concrete proposals.

In 2022, back-to-back with ATCM XLIV, a special workshop on environmental monitoring was held in and organised by Germany. In that workshop, a number of important issues to be monitored were identified, and importantly, much attention was also paid to the organization of the monitoring. It was recognized that once an international guiding framework would be established, ideally the national programs would respond, and contribute to it. This however would require effective international coordination, a mechanism to fill gaps (in terms of Antarctic areas or parameters covered), as well as a sustainable funding base. Concrete proposals put forward included the establishment of a dedicated subsidiary body under the CEP. This body would be responsible for developing and maintaining the international framework, overseeing implementation, building on national programs’ efforts, as well as additional monitoring implemented by the subsidiary body. A fee collected from the tourism industry was proposed as a basis for funding.

Most recently, in the informal workshop on Antarctic tourism held in Paris, France (8-10 March 2023), the need for such an international framework was reiterated, acknowledging previous proposals arising from formal and informal ATCM discussions made in this regard, . It was felt by many participants that it was time to convene an ICG to - on the basis of existing work and suggestions - develop a proposal for an international framework, including the institutional and financial aspects.

Proposed intersessional work

France and the Netherlands, as co-hosts of the Paris workshop, therefore, propose the CEP to discuss the matter, and to advice to the ATCM XLV to establish an ICG on an international framework for environmental monitoring.

The Terms of Reference would include the following:

* The ICG would be tasked to:
  + Develop a concrete proposal for an international framework for environmental monitoring, laying out the parameters of what and where to monitor, on the basis of the DPSIR-concept, and taking into account the important issue of cumulation;
  + Identify the organizational and institutional conditions needed for full implementation of the framework, including by considering the need for a dedicated monitoring body under the Treaty system;
  + Identify options and develop a proposal for the funding base needed for the full implementation of the framework.
* The ICG may draw from experiences and practices from other organisations, including CCAMLR;
* The ICG would work intersessionally and report to ATCM 46.