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Antarctic Environments Portal

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Working Paper submitted by Australia, Netherlands, New Zealand, Norway, Spain, United States and SCAR

Summary

The Antarctic Environments Portal continues to support the work of the Committee for Environmental Protection by making available to all CEP Members and Antarctic Treaty Parties, up-to-date, state-of-knowledge reports on issues of relevance to the Committee's work programme.

The Tinker Foundation grant that has supported the operation of the Portal since 2015, will come to a conclusion in 2019 and plans for transferring the Portal to SCAR are established, contingent on appropriate resourcing being in place.

Opportunities to enhance the structure and utility of the Portal continue to be explored.

The Working Paper authors would welcome CEP Member countries and Antarctic Treaty Parties giving consideration as to how they can ensure the ongoing utility of the Portal under SCAR oversight.

Acknowledgement

Professor David Walton was the part-time Editor for the Portal and sadly passed away in February of this year. As a colleague and friend, David will be greatly missed. His tireless work in bringing scientific knowledge to support the work of the Antarctic Treaty System will be his enduring legacy.

Background

The Antarctic Environments Portal (the Portal; www.environments.aq) continues to provide the CEP and Antarctic Treaty Parties with equitable access to reliable and up-to-date information on a range of issues relevant to the management of Antarctic environments. Information that is available through the Portal is prepared by Antarctic experts and is rigorously peer-reviewed before being published.

The Portal also facilitates SCAR's mandate to provide objective independent advice to bodies of the Antarctic Treaty System on issues of science and conservation affecting the management of Antarctica and the Southern Ocean.

Since 2015 the Portal has been hosted independently by the University of Canterbury, Christchurch, New Zealand and supported by a grant generously provided by the Tinker Foundation. The grant will conclude at the end of 2019. The Tinker Foundation grant has supported the:

- 1) employment of a part-time Editor, and part-time Editorial Assistant since 2017;
- 2) technical support for and cloud-hosting of the Portal website;
- 3) translation of content into the four Antarctic Treaty languages.

The Working Paper authors wish to express their sincere gratitude to the Tinker Foundation for the support provided to the Portal.

By means of Resolution 3 (2015) ATCM XXXVIII welcomed the development of the Portal and commended it as an important mechanism for making high quality, accurate, non-political and up-to-date scientific advice available to the Committee for Environmental Protection and the Antarctic Treaty Parties.

Relevance of the Portal to the work of the CEP

The Portal ensures that the current state of knowledge on key issues is commonly available to all CEP Members, as well as Antarctic Treaty Parties and the public.

Collectively the state-of-knowledge reports provided in the Portal contribute to fulfilling one of the CEP's core functions of advising the Antarctic Treaty Parties on the state of the Antarctic environment (Article 12(1)(j) of the Protocol refers).

The state-of-knowledge reports provided in the Portal also assist in supporting specific issues on the CEP's agenda, not least the research and information needs identified in the climate change response work programme (CCRWP), as well as the research questions included in the CEP's five-year work plan.

Content Management Plan

It is important that CEP Members (as the intended primary users) continue to have input to the content that is published on the Portal. The Portal Content Management Plan (submitted as IP23) has been developed to help facilitate a dialogue with the Committee over planned content for the Portal.

Comments and suggestions on the planned Information Summaries as set out in the Content Management Plan are encouraged. Feedback can be provided during discussions at the CEP meeting or at any time to the Portal Editor (editor@environments.aq).

Developments since CEP XXI

Several new Information or Emerging Issue Summaries have been added to the Portal since the last progress report:

- Microplastics in the Southern Ocean
- Sampling the Southern Ocean: technology for observing the marine system
- Pathways for the introduction of non-native species
- Antarctic sub-glacial lakes
- Diversity of lakes, ponds and streams

Importantly, several published Information Summaries have been reviewed and updated in keeping with the Portal's objectives of ensuring that information is as up-to-date as possible. This process of regular review of material published in the Portal will ensure that it continues to summarise and reflect the current state of knowledge in the peer reviewed literature.

An end-user survey was circulated to a wide range of Portal users in December 2018. Survey respondents indicated that they remained supportive of the Portal and its objectives. Most respondents that indicated that they had used the Portal before completing the survey indicated that they use the Portal at least a few times a year (86%). The majority of returning users (64%) reported that they were satisfied with the range of topics covered by the Portal.

Some returning users stated that they use the Portal for preparing for ATCMs or CEP meetings (38%), but the majority access it largely for general information purposes *i.e.* to keep up to date with Antarctic topics, rather than functional, directly task-related ones (56%).

Respondents also made suggestions for improvement, including for additional content (particularly on issues related to conservation, climate change and biodiversity) and the need to better promote the Portal among both the provider and end-user communities.

Since CEP XXI, the technology supporting the website has been upgraded and plans are in place to refresh the look and style of the website itself.

Web analytics suggests that the Portal continues to provide utility to users. For the period December 2017 to November 2018, the Portal was accessed over 6,500 times by close to 5,000 users. Since the Portal went live in August 2014 until October 2018, the site has been visited more than 21,000 times by over 15,000 users.

Transfer of the Portal to SCAR

Since 2015 the Portal has been hosted by the University of Canterbury, Christchurch, New Zealand and has been overseen by a Management Board.

ATCM Resolution 3 (2015) recommended that governments consider options to support the longer-term management of the Portal. As noted in ATCM XL / WP 25 the 2016 SCAR delegates meeting (held in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, 29-30 August) approved action by the SCAR Secretariat (with the support of New Zealand colleagues) to explore cost-neutral options for SCAR to take over the operational management of the Portal on conclusion of the Tinker Foundation grant.

The Portal Management Board continue to work with SCAR and the SCAR Secretariat to plan for a seamless and cost-neutral transfer of the Portal.

The Portal has been designed to be as efficient as possible to operate, though it is not without cost. In that regard, it is encouraging to note that some CEP Member countries have indicated that they are prepared to provide some funds to support SCAR's hosting of the Portal. However, if the Portal is to continue to serve as an information source for the work of the CEP, additional contributions are required.

SCAR colleagues would be pleased to discuss with colleagues on the margins of the CEP how to support the Portal through SCAR.

Offers to provide support-in-kind to the Portal would also be welcome. As previously recorded, and by way of example, France has kindly provided support to the Portal by translating the published Information Summaries into French. Additional support-in-kind might be provided through the hosting and maintaining of the Portal website.

On timing, plans are in place to transfer the Portal to SCAR in late 2019 early 2020.

Recommendations

New Zealand and SCAR recommend that the CEP and CEP Members:

1. Renew their support for the Antarctic Environments Portal, recognising that it continues to support the work of the Committee;
2. Review the Content Management Plan and provide suggestions for further issues to be covered through Information Summaries in the Portal, relevant to the CEP's agenda and interests;

Ensure the Portal continues to support the work of the Committee, by identifying how they can assist the ongoing operation of the Portal through SCAR through direct funding or support-in-kind.