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Emma Shortis

Lessons from the Last Continent: Science, Emotion, and the Relevance of History

When the world seemed on the verge of opening up the last great untouched continent to mining, environmentalists let out a collective howl of outrage. In 1978, the World Park Antarctica campaign was established to oppose efforts, under the auspices of the 1959 Antarctic Treaty, to negotiate an Antarctic mining agreement. Spearheaded by the Antarctic and Southern Ocean Coalition and Greenpeace International, the World Park campaign insisted that the Antarctic “wilderness” was too precious and fragile to allow any kind of mining to take place. It was, in the words of Jim Barnes, the founder of the Coalition, “fundamentally crazy to be thinking about obtaining oil and other minerals that may be in the Antarctic, particularly in view of the latest reports from the scientific community in the climate context.”¹

The World Park Antarctica campaign has been hailed as one of the most successful campaigns in the history of international environmentalism. For six years, environmentalists waged an international offensive against the Antarctic minerals negotiations. They held public protests, lobbied states and international organizations, grabbed media attention, steadily increased international awareness, and recruited international celebrity Jacques-Yves Cousteau to their cause.

In 1988, despite these efforts, the parties to the Antarctic Treaty adopted the Convention on the Regulation of Antarctic Mineral Resource Activities, which, had it come into force, would have opened the continent to mining. But less than a year later, due largely to the World Park campaign’s success in convincing much of the world that mining in Antarctica would be “fundamentally crazy,” Australia and France announced that they would no longer support the Convention. Instead, they would fight for Antarctica to be designated a “Nature Reserve–Land of Science.”

In 1991, the alliance between the Australian and French governments and the World Park Antarctica campaign resulted in the adoption of a comprehensive environmental

¹ James Barnes, “The Antarctic Treaty System in Crisis: Some Observations and Suggestions,” 9 October 1990, 3. Antarctic and Southern Ocean Coalition (ASOC) digital archives, in author’s possession.

protection agreement for the entire continent, and an effectively indefinite ban on Antarctic mining. In a landscape littered by failures and half-measures, the 1991 Environmental Protection Protocol to the Antarctic Treaty stands out as a stunning success in environmental campaigning and diplomacy.

How did this happen? Why was the World Park Antarctica campaign so successful? And what might it teach us about effective environmental campaigning and communication that could be relevant to our current predicament?

As Lynda Walsh notes in this volume (p. 20), “success will always be situational.” The unusual success of this campaign, however, is precisely what makes it so relevant to understanding the collective failure to effectively communicate the science of climate change and reach global agreement over mitigation. Dagomar Degroot points out in his recent book that “historians rarely feature in discussions about global warming.”² Degroot, and Walsh in this volume, rightly suggest that this marginalizing of the humanities in the communication and construction of the science and policy of climate change has been to our great collective detriment. Historians have important contributions to make to this debate, particularly in challenging the more recent neoliberal capture of climate science, which renders it a discourse grounded almost exclusively in market solutions, numbers, and statistics. The success and nature of the World Park Antarctica campaign of the 1980s challenges this dominance, demonstrating the important added value historians and history can bring to current debates. A study of the campaign offers one of the elusive “alternative models” of climate communication Walsh calls for: specifically, models “that do not position climate science and scientists as the final authority” (this issue, p. 15).

Science and the pursuit of scientific knowledge are fundamental to modern Antarctic politics and history.³ From the beginning of the World Park campaign, environmentalists insisted that opening Antarctica to mining would dangerously undermine the continent’s role as a place of peace and science. In the 1980s, Antarctic science was itself providing ample justification for the environmental protection of the continent. In the midst of the World Park campaign, as activists consistently noted, understandings of both human-induced damage to the ozone layer and global climate change emerged

2 Dagomar Degroot, *The Frigid Golden Age: Climate Change, the Little Ice Age, and the Dutch Republic, 1560–1720* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 307.

3 For more on the role of science in the history and politics of Antarctica, see Adrian Howkins, *Frozen Empires: An Environmental History of the Antarctic Peninsula* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017).

directly from Antarctica.⁴ Scientific studies were also suggesting that an oil spill in Antarctica—which World Park campaigners insisted would be inevitable should drilling go ahead—would be far more devastating, and far more difficult to clean up, in the remote and unique Antarctic ecosystem. World Park activists frequently cited these scientific studies and developments to support their cause, evoking the specter of terrible—and preventable—accidents that had already happened elsewhere, such as the catastrophic *Exxon Valdez* spill in Alaska. “Transferred to Antarctica,” Jacques Cousteau asked a captivated television audience during his 1990 documentary on the continent, “could such an accident ever be erased?”⁵ Scientific studies suggested that it could not. Perhaps more importantly, recent history suggested that this knowledge would not prevent states or industrial interests from proceeding with oil drilling anyway, should they be given the chance.

During their highly publicized expeditions to the Antarctic, Greenpeace activists also conducted some “citizen science,” undertaking research of their own and experimenting with low-impact, environmentally friendly base construction. In conducting its own “World Park” expeditions, Greenpeace explicitly challenged the monopoly that state-sanctioned science had on the continent. Part of Greenpeace’s mission was to “expose” the current practices of those state-sanctioned scientific organizations, which included leaving leaking fuel drums in the open and amassing large trash heaps. By drawing attention to these practices, Greenpeace challenged the institutional epistemic authority of organizations like the US National Science Foundation, while still supporting individual scientists and their research. The World Park expeditions insisted that state-sanctioned institutions were not the only organizations that had the right to speak for, or about, the continent, and that those institutions—as opposed to the individual scientists working for them—were not always the benign, apolitical actors they claimed to be.

Greenpeace’s citizen science and the sometimes troubling role of state-sanctioned science on the continent, though, were only one aspect of a much larger narrative deployed by the World Park campaign. From the beginning, the fight against mining in Antarctica focused

4 Marcus Haward and Tom Griffiths, eds., *Australia and the Antarctic Treaty System: 50 Years of Influence* (Sydney: UNSW Press, 2011), 348. On activists’ observations, see for example Cousteau Society/Fondation Cousteau, “Antarctica in the 1990’s: Challenge for a True Global Environmental Policy,” January 1990, 2, 5, 6, and 7, Records of the Australian Conservation Foundation, National Liaison Office, Canberra, National Library of Australia, MS 9430/26/1322.

5 *Lilliput in Antarctica: A Cousteau Journey*, produced by Jacques-Yves Cousteau with Hedwige Bienvenu (Chesapeake: The Cousteau Society, 1990), digitized VHS.



Figure 1:
Greenpeace ship *MV Greenpeace* in the Antarctic. Blue-eyed shags on an iceberg in the foreground, 1 January 1988
Credit: © Greenpeace / Steve Morgan

not so much on the scientific “proof” that it was dangerous, but on the multiple, overlapping, and unquantifiable “values” of Antarctica to all of humanity. Antarctica was of “paramount importance to mankind,” as the 1981 International Union for the Conservation of Nature Resolution on Antarctica asserted, because of “science,” yes, but also because of the impact of its “wilderness qualities” on “education and inspiration.”⁶ Combined with some very effective international and domestic political campaigning, this emotional framing of the continent as an “inspirational space” with its own inherent value is central to explaining the popular appeal, and thus the ultimate success, of the World Park campaign. Science was integrated into a larger emotional framework that evoked fear, empathy, awe, and hope for the “last continent” and its nonhuman inhabitants.

Those animal inhabitants played an essential role in the campaign. World Park activists insisted that mining, and the inevitable accidents and spills that would come with it, would pose an unacceptable risk to the unique and fragile wildlife that called the continent home. Vulnerable and distressed penguins in particular featured heavily in

6 International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN), Resolution 15/20, “Antarctica Environment and the Southern Ocean,” 1981, https://portals.iucn.org/library/sites/library/files/resrecfiles/GA_15_RES_020_Antarctica_Environment_and_the_South.pdf.

campaign activities and material. Protestors dressed up as penguins, marching around and carrying placards in front of minerals negotiation meetings. Activists linked Antarctic oil drilling and the possibility of spills to other iconic marine mammals found in Antarctica: in 1989, for example, Cousteau asked members of the American press “Why silence forever the whales and seals that sing under the ice?”⁷ In the 1970s and 1980s, the “silencing” of whales had become a real possibility. Cousteau and his colleagues in ASOC and Greenpeace deliberately evoked this fear and linked it directly to the minerals negotiations.



Figure 2:
“Trash at the
McMurdo Base”
Antarctica 1989
Expedition camp. Trash,
1 January 1989
Credit: © Greenpeace /
Keith-Nels Swenson

If the Antarctic Minerals Convention was adopted, activists insisted, the habitat these animals relied on for their very survival would be gravely threatened. Cute and vulnerable penguins, and emotionally intelligent and mysterious whales, required that humans, with our destructive tendencies, simply stay away. During the campaign—indeed, even today—activists characterized Antarctica as a “pristine wilderness.” It was, as Cousteau described it, “the last unspoiled area of our planet.” Allowing mining to occur there would not only threaten vulnerable species and ecosystems; it could lead, Cousteau warned, “to the destruction of the continent.”⁸ This potential loss was almost never de-

7 Phil McCombs, “Cousteau’s Washington Plunge: Charming the Town for Antarctica,” *The Washington Post*, 21 September 1989.

8 “Cousteau Launches Effort to Scuttle Antarctica Treaty,” *Tulsa World*, 21 September 1989; Robert Hennelly, “The End of Antarctica?” *Christian Science Monitor*, 7 February 1990.

scribed in economic or political terms. It would be a great loss to humanity if Antarctica were destroyed because of what it represented to us: the possibilities for peace, our ability to curb our own destructive tendencies, and the awesome inspiration of a place that neither required nor welcomed our presence.

By helping to place Antarctica at the emotional center of broader environmental fears about oil spills, vulnerable animals, ozone depletion, climate change, and our plundering of the globe, the campaign thus transformed Antarctica into a stage from which to campaign for the very “survival of the planet.”⁹ Activists insisted that allowing mining in “the last remaining unspoiled world” and the ensuing inevitable accidents would amount to nothing less than a total failure of humanity to protect its common heritage. As the French Prime Minister Michel Rocard argued—in a clear echo of contemporary debates about climate change—the World Park campaign was about the “right of future generations to inherit from us a planet that is still fit to live in.”¹⁰ Protecting Antarctica would mean that humanity could still hold some hope for the future. Humans had destroyed almost everywhere else, but this one pristine place could remain untouched, and leaving it intact might mean there was hope for other places, too. What happened to Antarctica, then, was intimately connected to fear and anger about what was happening to the rest of the world, and simultaneously, to hopes for a better future.

In fostering this narrative, World Park activists ensured that mining in the “last unspoiled world” became an incomprehensible prospect for millions of people—and eventually, their political leaders. A petition against the 1988 Minerals Convention organized by ASOC and the Cousteau Society gained 1.5 million signatures in less than a year.¹¹ The World Park campaign, unlike the “neoliberal” underpinnings of communication Walsh outlines in this volume, conceptualized “civil society” as a “democratic source of potential resistance to state and industrial interests.” For the World Park campaign, that democratic resistance to the Minerals Agreement proved essential to their eventual success. The domestic and international political pressure brought to bear by the campaign led directly to the Australian and French decisions to renege on the Minerals Convention, and was central to the subsequent adoption of the environmental protection agreement.

9 Mort Rosenblum, “Battle Over Antarctica: Exploit it or Preserve It?,” *The Record*, 8 October 1989.

10 Associated Press, “Antarctica Meeting Opens With Calls for Preservation,” *Tulsa World*, 10 October 1989.

11 Associated Press, 10 October 1989; Hennelly, “The End of Antarctica?”; “Sunday’s People,” *The Record*, 22 October 1989.

By insisting that Antarctica was valuable to humanity as more than just another place to mine, and that people everywhere were stakeholders in its future, the World Park campaign forced the parties to the Antarctic Treaty to consider more than just environmental regulation, industrial interests, and economic cost-benefit analyses. The campaign, in Walsh's words, managed to successfully "resist the neoliberal paradigm" (this issue, p. 18). In doing so, the World Park campaign also, perhaps, offers some solace to those, like Jeroen Oomen in this volume, justifiably concerned about the erosion of trust and "a future that does not have a common narrative of truth" (this issue, p. 29). While the World Park campaign "decentered" science and scientific knowledge in order to build a broader narrative embedded in values and emotion, in which everyone was a "stakeholder," the campaign still placed great value in that science—fostering "trust"—but found that value in a greater human story.

Of course, there may be no specific "lessons" in this particular story.¹² It is entirely possible that the World Park campaign happened at a unique moment in time, in a unique political and historical space. Preventing mining in the last unspoiled world was, compared to the wicked policy problem of climate change, relatively straightforward. Politically and economically, the sacrifices made to "save" Antarctica were minimal, and for industrial interests, theoretical rather than immediate. It's worth noting, however, that environmentalists are attempting, right now, to replicate this rare success. In its current campaign for an Antarctic Ocean Sanctuary, Greenpeace is using many of the same techniques: petitions, celebrity engagement, a focus on unique and vulnerable wildlife, political lobbying, and an underlying narrative focused on the inherent value of nature and our hope for the future. If we can do this again in Antarctica, Greenpeace suggests, we might just be able to do it elsewhere, too.

The success of the World Park campaign demonstrates that it is at least possible, given the right circumstances, to develop and maintain narratives that value and include, but don't center, scientific authority. The World Park campaign was partly justified by scientific knowledge, but found value well beyond the quantitative data science gives us about the history and future of our climate. The campaign instead deployed an emotionally resonant narrative based in the inherent value of the global environment, our re-

12 Tom Griffiths, "The Transformative Craft of Environmental History: Perspectives on Australian Scholarship," in "Visions of Australia: Environments in History," ed. Christof Mauch, Ruth Morgan, and Emily O'Gorman, *RCC Perspectives: Transformations in Environment and Society* 2 (2017): 117, <https://doi.org/10.5282/rcc/7915>.

sponsibility to protect it, and our hope for the future, suggesting to the millions of people inspired by the campaign that another story was possible. Such stories, as Tom Griffiths so beautifully put it in a recent volume of *Perspectives*, are “the most powerful educational tool we possess.”¹³ In the 1980s, as now, Antarctica served as an inspirational reminder that the planet is not just here for us. Historians, and activists, in addition to scientists, have an important role to play in telling and retelling that story.

Suggested Further Reading

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13 Griffiths, 118.