

The role of the protected area concept in protecting the world's largest natural reserve: Antarctica

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Abstract

Should the entire Antarctic continent and the surrounding islands be recognised as a 'protected area' or as a continent where certain areas, just like anywhere else, may be designated as protected areas? To find an answer to this question, this paper first discusses the most important agreements and declarations on environmental protection in Antarctica. Next, these instruments are compared with the components of IUCN's 'protected area' definition (2008). In the light of this overall protection of Antarctica, the instrument of designating areas as Antarctic Specially Protected Areas (ASPAs) is discussed on the basis of a quick scan of 42 management plans for existing ASPAs. It is concluded that Antarctica could indeed be considered as a protected area and that the ASPA instrument is so shaped to provide specific areas with 'extra protection' by regulating human activities in those areas with a high level of detail. However, the continuous increase in human activities in Antarctica raises concerns with respect to the scope and completeness of the existing legal instruments. These concerns regarding the overall protection of Antarctica could become an argument for applying the ASPA instrument in respect of larger areas to ensure the comprehensive protection of at least certain parts of Antarctica. This would make the ASPA system more comparable with protected area systems in other parts of the world; however, strengthening the overall protection of Antarctica – parallel to the further development of the 'specially' protected area system - would be more consistent with Antarctica's protected status as has developed since the Antarctic Treaty was signed 50 years ago.

Keywords

Antarctica; protected area; natural reserve; ASPA; management plan

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