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Antarctica and international climate policy: a report from COP21

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Abstract

This article reports on the 21st Conference of Parties (COP) of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), held 30 November-12 December, 2015, in Paris, France. After providing an overview of the primary outcome of COP21, the Paris Agreement, this report explores the intersection between the Antarctic Treaty System and the UNFCCC. There is little overlap between the two institutions, causing a climate policy gap between Antarctica and the rest of the world. This paper concludes with recommendations to narrow this gap.

Keywords

Climate, governance, UNFCCC, policy, environmental management

Introduction

Antarctica, in many ways, is emblematic of anthropogenic climate change. From the ecological changes on the Antarctic Peninsula to the instability of the West Antarctic Ice Sheet, Antarctica is both a place where climate change is happening now as well as a place that, in a warming world, threatens our coastal cities and states. Antarctic researchers from dozens of countries produce cutting-edge, transformative climate science: many of these Antarctic scientists also speak in public about the changing Antarctic environment and anthropogenic climate change more broadly.

With significant ecological and environmental changes and climate scientists communicating widely about their Antarctic and global climate change research, it is puzzling that there is a policy disconnect between Antarctica and the rest of the world. In the international climate policy arena—especially the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC)—Antarctica is present, but only minimally. In the Antarctic Treaty System (ATS), we might say the same thing about climate—climate change is present in policy discussions, but only minimally. Why might this be so?

A simple answer would be that the ATS is focused on continental-scale management, logistics, cooperation, and information sharing while the UNFCCC's domain is international climate policy. This, though, is not just a matter of two institutional bodies with separate missions: there is a history to the ATS' explicit refusal to participate in, or even engage substantially with, the United Nations (Beck 2006).

Therefore, this report tracks the UNFCCC meetings in Paris November 30- December 12, 2015, with particular attention to the moments where Antarctica shows up in these meetings, where it does not, and opportunities where Antarctic and UNFCCC matters of concern might overlap with some effort. Institutional arrangements should not omit the Antarctic from international climate agreements, nor should the ATS expect all Antarctic climate mitigation to be decided and acted upon elsewhere. Climate action that is meaningful to the Antarctic can take place in both the ATS and UNFCCC.

Overview of UNFCCC, COP21, and the Paris Agreement

The UNFCCC convenes annually at their Conference of Parties (COP) to work toward international solutions to avoiding dangerous anthropogenic interference with the environment, particularly the atmosphere.

The Framework Convention on Climate Change was established in 1992 at the Rio Earth Summit. Every participating state, including the United States, is a party to this 1992 FCCC. The Parties attempted to create a binding, international carbon cap-and-trade policy in 1997 with the Kyoto Protocol. The United States Congress, representing the largest carbon emitters on Earth at the time, did not accede to the Kyoto Protocol[1]. With the new Obama Administration in office, 2009's COP15 in Copenhagen began with high hopes but ended in failure due to, among other factors, intransigence between the Chinese and American negotiating parties. Instead of a binding agreement,

the last minute, voluntary Copenhagen Accord mapped out a path towards an agreement with a deadline of COP21 in 2015.

There was a tremendous amount of work done in the lead-up to the Paris meetings that had been put into motion in Copenhagen. The United States government successfully pursued a bilateral agreement with China and a more ambiguous "partnership" with India to reduce carbon emissions. The United States Environmental Protection Agency also implemented a national emissions reduction program called the Clean Power Plan in mid-2015. This plan is federalist, in that it requires each state to meet reductions targets by setting emissions reduction strategies with attention to each state's individual energy mix and economy. The Clean Power Plan is being tested through the United States judicial system with the expectation that it will come before the United State Supreme Court[2].

On November 13, 2015, the Paris terror attacks occurred. For a few days, it was uncertain if COP21 would proceed in the wake of these attacks. However, with some security changes within the venue and to some civil society activities occurring outside the venue (such as the cancellation of marches), the meetings were maintained as were many of the civil society opportunities, especially those with educational or outreach components. Activists were highly visible within the venue of COP21 and many protested despite police orders to the contrary in several locations around Paris. Security was extremely tight at the conference venue, particularly on the first day when over 150 heads of state came to give opening remarks. Parisian highways were closed down, military guarded the venue's perimeter, and helicopters circled overhead. Security remained serious throughout the meetings but those extraordinary measures ceased.

The venue at Le Bourget was a pop-up climate village with 40,000 credentialed participants. There were two Plenary Halls to house the formal procedures and dozens of breakout rooms of various sizes to accompany meetings among various factions and interest groups. One hall housed Party delegation offices. Another held a World Fair- type set of national displays where Parties could showcase their climate efforts, hold press conferences and educational events, and serve as a meeting point. Some of these displays were truly spectacular. For instance, India's booth cost several million dollars to design, featuring a programmed "water curtain" that would spell out words and symbols like "PEACE" and "COP21." The United States booth focused on scientific and policy presentations. The Gulf Alliance states had an opulent meeting space with reception areas, displays, and presentations. These were highly enjoyable to peruse, though the exercise begged the question of why so much time, money, and effort was being poured into such a limited-viewership endeavor. Another hall housed the press, with media offices and several press conference rooms available. Climate Action Now (CAN), in particular, held a concise daily briefing from an environmental NGO perspective. Not all press conferences were accessible to Observer delegates: often more high-level briefings were limited to media-badged delegates only[3]. A final hall housed Observer booths and a large series of rooms for Side Events, which tended to be organized by Observer parties to highlight particular actions, programs, or issues.

The Paris Agreement, the formal policy outcome of COP21, is structurally similar to the United States' Clean Power Plan. While the Kyoto Protocol is a top-down, cap-and-trade scheme, the Paris Agreement is bottom-up, with states developing their own carbon emission reduction plans.

These plans are called Intended Nationally Determined Contributions (INDC) and most FCCC Parties submitted these ahead of the Paris meetings. The cumulative pledges of the INDC commit our planet to more than 3 degrees of warming Celsius and are therefore insufficient for mitigating anthropogenic climate change. However, governments plan to revisit INDCs in the UNFCCC every 5 years with more ambitious goals anticipated as energy systems transition and alternative energy solutions increase in efficiency and decrease in cost.

Major pieces of the Agreement remain to be operationalized. The Paris Agreement is ambitious and should be commended for its first-ever truly international climate agreement. However, financing and other implementation issues remain outstanding and will be taken up in future meetings of the UNFCCC, beginning with COP22 in Marrakech, Morocco, November 7-18, 2016.

Antarctica at COP21: present but peripheral

Antarctica was present in conversations at COP21, but it was rarely in the foreground. However, noting where Antarctic issues show up in relation to climate change illuminate a starting place from which to consider future Antarctic engagement in UNFCCC events and meetings.

First, the Antarctic was well represented by Antarctic scientists. Several formal side events featured Antarctic researchers. For example, the Scientific Committee on Antarctic Research (SCAR) and the International Cryosphere Initiative (ICCI) held side events on the West Antarctic Ice Sheet and black carbon. They also held press conferences to communicate their findings and ideas in media-friendly terms, while the side events were more nuanced and geared toward specialists. For COP21 participants seeking climate science, Antarctica was present as a site of cutting edge, high visibility climate research.

Second, the Antarctic was present—sort of—in conversations about sea level rise. Global sea level rise, already occurring and impacting communities, and projected to accelerate, is a major topic of concern among residents of low-lying communities and citizens of island states. Sea level rise promises to be one of the key contributors to human impacts from climate change, affecting displacement, drinking water, security, infrastructure, and cultural and national identity. Coping with sea level rise, through engineering or relocation planning, is a core matter of climate justice.

Where the increased sea level was coming from was not an explicit part of the sea level rise conversation. This is due in large part to the fact that discourse around sea level rise is now focused on justice and mitigation, instead of scientific cause. Similarly, Antarctic research on the ice sheet rarely focuses on the global societal impacts of ice sheet disintegration. The scientific research presentations and the mitigation planning for affected communities literally happened in different rooms at COP21. Future organizers might fill this communication gap by creating more intentional opportunities at the UNFCCC meetings to simultaneously engage with new research, human impacts, and potential solutions.

Third, the Antarctic was included in conversations about ocean conversation, but again, peripherally or anecdotally. Most visibly, former Vice President Al Gore, now with the Climate Reality Project,

spoke publically about protecting the Southern Ocean with Marine Protected Areas. The Southern Ocean was also highlighted in side events by ocean-focused NGOs, including Oceans Inc., High Seas Alliance, and Blue Climate Solutions. A Southern Ocean-focused side event at a future COP would increase visibility and interest in preserving Antarctica's marine environment.

Finally, the Antarctic showed up in several examples of performance art and activism, including some marching penguins, a funeral ceremony for ice, and a booth to get a fictional Antarctic passport stamp. Antarctica, especially its charismatic penguins, is appealing to people interested in environmental issues. Much more could be done to channel enthusiasm and support for Antarctica via Antarctic symbols like wilderness, science, glaciers, penguins and extreme environments, into the broader conversation about the future of our planet under anthropogenic climate change.

Antarctic Absences in UNFCCC

The single most relevant absence for Antarctica at COP21 is simply that there is no seat at the formal negotiations for the Antarctic continent. People within the UNFCCC, I posit, assume that the Antarctic Treaty System and its signatory parties are leading Antarctica's climate mitigation efforts. The ATS, though, regularly punts any climate deliberations in their meetings to the UNFCCC, as international climate policy is not their charge. In short, this means that there is no meaningful climate policy, or agreed-up climate action for Antarctica. Even though parts of the Antarctic are among the most rapidly changing on Earth due to global warming, Antarctica is a climate policy no-go zone.

Scientists, Antarctic organizations, and environmental advocacy groups provide information to UNFCCC about Antarctica as a climate threat and an environment threatened by climate change. This engagement, though, is partial. And at an event with many vital messages, partial engagement translates to low interest and weak policy outcomes for the protection of Antarctica.

Antarctic Opportunities

As the UNFCCC moves into decisions on how to implement the Paris Agreement, there are opportunities for people who manage and care about the Antarctic to insure that the continent and its waters are included in climate decisions, including:

1. More clear linkages between scientific research and human impacts. Climate change is overwhelmingly presented to audiences with a singular discursive pattern: first, the scientific evidence, second, human impacts and third, proposed policy solutions. We see this pattern reified in the three working groups of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, and replicated elsewhere. These sides of the climate story are essential for decision-making, but this is not the only possible narrative strategy. How can we communicate the linkages between scientific knowledge, human impacts, and solutions in integrative ways?

The primary human activity in Antarctica is scientific research. International scientists working in Antarctica make tremendous contributions to our society's understanding of global climate science. Organizations supporting Antarctic research, such as national research foundations, national

Antarctic programs, and the Scientific Committee on Antarctic Research can coordinate scientific research to help audiences, including various publics and policy makers, make connections between climate science and its effects on people and the planet.

2. More Antarctic information at COPs, including science but not limited to it. Highlight sustainability innovations. Through side events, national pavilions, and NGO booths, Antarctic organizations have an opportunity to inform the world's most engaged climate actors. While Antarctic climate science is fairly well represented at the UNFCCC, there is more to tell the world about Antarctica. Despite the Antarctic being one of the most extreme environments on the planet, several national Antarctic programs have built zero- or low-emissions research stations using renewable energy sources. COP meetings, with their high aspirations and idealism, are excellent venues for showcasing these efforts: if it can be done in remote and harsh Antarctica, why can't it be done at home?

3. Link up the Antarctic to other international conservation areas. Antarctica is not the only international space devoted to environmental protection and cooperation. Other examples include transboundary protected areas such as Waterton-Glacier National Park (Canada and United States), Morokulien (Sweden and Norway), the European Green Belt (Europe), and the Great Limpopo Transfrontier Park (South Africa, Zimbabwe, Mozambique (Ali 2007). However, the Antarctic Treaty System's Specially Managed and Protected Areas provided some of the most rigorous and innovative examples of environmental protection on Earth—and this is achieved through international cooperation. As other places put together management plans to cope with and mitigate their changing climate, Antarctic environmental managers can contribute expert knowledge on how to manage international conservation areas, as well as gain inspiration from other international cases.

Furthermore, environmental areas undergoing rapid climate change may need a new suite of management strategies, including more nimble decision making, enabling research in rapidly changing zones, and, possibly, new or transitional protected areas as species migrate. Robust cooperation between Antarctic environmental managers and their colleagues elsewhere can help conservation workers protect transitional areas with a high degree of competence.

4. Consideration of how national Antarctic programs and tour operators relate to their nation's INDC—and how Antarctic operations might contribute, even symbolically, to carbon emission reductions. Cumulatively, human activities in Antarctica contribute very little to global greenhouse gas emissions—it is simply the least populated part of the planet by far. However, all human activity in Antarctica is extremely carbon intensive. On top of that, Antarctic science is some of the most technologically advanced research on the planet, and some of the research stations are highly innovative in terms of sustainability and renewable energy. Antarctic program managers can work to make their programs and logistical efforts align with—or exceed—national goals. The symbolic value of a sustainable Antarctic cannot be overstated.

5. More participation and collaboration between the Antarctic Treaty System and the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change. Following the publication of SCAR's Review Report on Antarctic Climate Change and the Environment (ACCE), R. Tucker Scully, the Chair of the XXXII ATCM in Baltimore, Maryland, USA sent a letter to the executive secretary of the UNFCCC to highlight Antarctic climate science and climate-related decisions

made by the Antarctic Treaty System. Communication between these two organizations is rare, but this is easily remedied.

Intergovernmental organizations like the Antarctic Treaty can apply to be given status at UNFCCC meetings. With status, delegates from the Antarctic Treaty System (likely members of the Antarctic Treaty Secretariat) would have the opportunity to communicate about Antarctic climate impacts and efforts to the international climate community, liaise with other IGOs, and provide an official voice for Antarctica in the climate negotiating room. Note that IGOs would not be making policy decisions related to the Antarctic Treaty System—IGOs do not make policy at all at the UNFCCC meetings—but informing policymakers on Antarctic climate topics. This, more than any other option, would make the Antarctic visible at UNFCCC.

Conclusion

The Antarctic Treaty System and the Framework Convention on Climate Change do not have much to do with each other, though the effects of anthropogenic climate change in the Antarctic will have severe consequences on the rest of the world. Therefore, this report summarizes the state of affairs at COP21 and Antarctica's representation there, and proposes strategies for improving the relationship between Antarctic science, management, and logistics and international climate policy. Even though there is a clear distinction in policy domains, the material effects of climate change do not mind these boundaries. Decisions about management, policy, science, and sustainability should be made in light of this serious environmental matter without exclusions to vast global regions.

References

1. This narrative is US-focused due to their historical record of low- or non-engagement on international climate policy as well as the location of the author.
2. At the time of writing, the Supreme Court of the United States put a stay on states' requirement to implement the Clean Power Plan, a grave indicator that the high court expected to overturn the decision. The death of Justice Antonin Scalia one week after this decision, though, shifts the ideological distribution of the Supreme Court. His replacement is a matter of intense debate during the 2016 election year with members of the Senate Republican majority vowing to stall any of President Obama's nominees until the next president is elected. Due to these contingencies, the decision reverts to the previous court, which is expected to uphold the Clean Power Plan.
3. The author attended COP21 as a credentialed NGO Observer on behalf of the Antarctic and Southern Ocean Coalition (ASOC). There are several tiers of credentials, including Parties to the Convention, Observer States, NGO/ IGO/ civil society Observers, and Media. Type of credential influences access to parts of the conference venue and some events, such as bilateral negotiations or press briefings expected to reach capacity.

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