

## EDITORIAL

### CONSERVATION OF SUB-ANTARCTIC ISLANDS

There are not very many sub-Antarctic islands. The most recent and most accepted classification includes only six island groups, all within a few degrees latitude of the Antarctic Polar Front. They are the Prince Edward Islands, Iles Crozet, Iles de Kerguelen, Macquarie Island, Heard and McDonald Islands and South Georgia. More northerly islands, often loosely called sub-Antarctic, are classified as Cold Temperate and include Tristan da Cunha, Gough and the New Zealand shelf islands. Islands to the south are classified as Maritime Antarctic, such as the South Sandwiches, South Orkneys, South Shetlands and Bouvetøya. Essentially the Cold Temperate islands support trees and shrubs, the sub-Antarctic islands do not. Sub-Antarctic islands support a rich vascular flora, whereas Maritime Antarctic islands support only two vascular plants, their vegetation being made up mainly of cryptogams (mosses and lichens).

The six sub-Antarctic island groups are all north of 60°S and fall outside the Antarctic Treaty area. Only national law therefore applies. Only four nations possess sub-Antarctic islands as classified here: Australia, France, New Zealand and the United Kingdom. It is therefore not surprising that their conservation status varies. For example, Macquarie has been a nature reserve since 1933, but the Prince Edward Islands (Marion and Prince Edward) have no legal nature conservation status at all. Management practices also vary: Australia (Macquarie, Heard and McDonald) and South Africa (Marion and Prince Edward) have active campaigns to remove alien mammals, such as cats and rabbits. By contrast, France continues (apparently) to introduce aliens, such as domestic sheep and trout, to Iles Kerguelen.

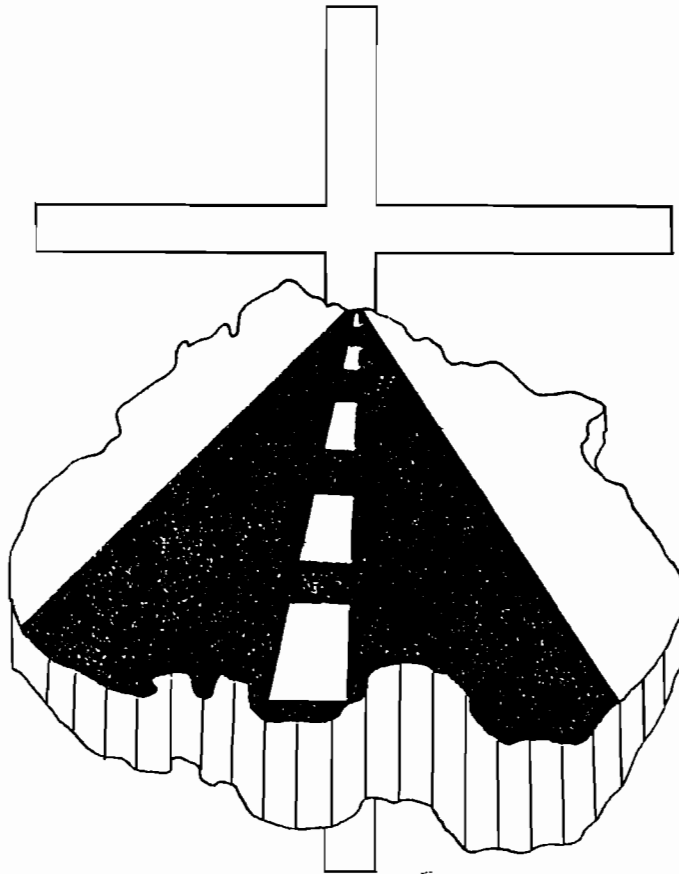
It is pleasing to note that the sub-Antarctic nations have started meeting to discuss the conservation and management of their special islands. In September 1986 a workshop entitled "The Biological Basis for Conservation of Subantarctic Islands" was held at Paimpont, France. The report of the workshop, *inter alia*, lauds South Africa for its conservation efforts and chides France for its lack of such efforts.

Following on this successful meeting it was a shock to hear that the South African government department with responsibility for the Prince Edwards was proposing the construction of a landing strip on Marion Island and had appointed an Environmental Impact Assessment Panel to report on the proposal. The African Seabird Group is aware of the multifarious danger of such a development: disturbance, pollution, air strikes and the increased likelihood of introducing aliens. A landing strip at Marion would be akin to the opening of Pandora's Box. The island, quite

literally, would never be the same again. The ASG has undertaken a world-wide mailing to individuals and organizations, requesting them to write to the EIA Panel with their opinions. Only *informed* individuals and organizations were approached, to avoid "crank" responses. I'm pleased to say the response has been overwhelming: many well-reasoned letters arguing against the landing strip have been sent in, with copies to the ASG. At the time of writing, the panel, having completed its on-site inspection in February, is preparing its report. Let us hope it will come out against the proposal and that the Wandering Albatrosses and King Penguins of Marion Island will be left undisturbed for science and posterity.

*John Cooper*

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**IN MEMARION?**