



What Past Battles Can Teach Today's Activists Fighting Environmental Catastrophes

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Antarctica has been in the news lately – for good reason. In July this year, a 5,800 kilometer-square iceberg – about the size of Delaware – broke off what is known as the “Larsen C” ice shelf. Experts fear that the ice shelf will soon collapse entirely, meeting the same fate as its cousin, “Larsen B.” Months later, in October, news broke that a colony of about 40,000 Adelie penguins suffered a catastrophic breeding season – only two chicks survived, while the rest died of starvation. The root causes of both of these events have been traced to rapid, ongoing climate change.

Antarctica, to put it mildly, is in big trouble. Although the continent’s penguin populations might be helped if the governments of the world can agree to establish a Marine Protected Area in East Antarctica, the ice will continue melting unless there is swift action to slow climate change. And the ice matters to the world’s people, because there is a direct connection between melting ice sheets in the Antarctic and the fate of cities like New York and Mumbai.

Conversations and conferences about ways/how to avoid climate catastrophe occur regularly all over the world. Although issues of environmental justice and degradation are regularly pondered, these conversations exhibit some common shortcomings. Most take an ahistorical approach to deliberations aimed at agreement, failing to account for entrenched social structures and power dynamics that create constraints and opportunities for today’s deliberations. What is more, apart from celebrating the 1987 Montreal agreement that helped protect the ozone layer, most discussions, even those that take the past into account, focus too narrowly on the real and perceived failures of intergovernmental negotiations. My research fills in these gaps by focusing on lessons from another successful treaty: the 1991 ban on all types of mining in the Antarctic.

The 1987 Montreal Protocol and the 1991 Antarctic Mining Ban

The 1987 Montreal Protocol has dominated discussions of “successful” intergovernmental treaties by policymakers, academics, and environmental advocates. That Protocol, which recently reached its 30th anniversary, aimed to phase out the use of harmful chemicals that were destroying the ozone layer, Montreal was undoubtedly a great success, because studies show that the ozone layer is indeed recovering.

The 1991 pact banning Antarctic mining is, however, another example of a genuinely successful global pact agreement? (“pact” twice) – and it was a pre-emptive rather than reactive agreement to protect the environment, one that provides lessons across national jurisdictions and applies to an entire ecosystem.

To understand this example, we need to look south. In the 1980s, in the wake of the oil shock, western governments began looking for sources of oil outside the Middle East. It didn’t take long for them to cast their eyes to the last unexploited continent: Antarctica. The countries that governed the continent – including the United States – set about negotiating an agreement that would have, eventually, allowed mining and oil exploitation to begin.

The negotiations took six years – and as they proceeded, environmentalists who regarded Antarctica as the last untouched wilderness on earth, took note. In 1978, they formed a coalition of environmental organizations under the umbrella of the Antarctic and Southern Ocean Coalition and immediately started working against the agreement. Opponents took a multi-level approach. Together with Greenpeace, the coalition worked with smaller countries at the United Nations to draw attention to what countries governing Antarctica were trying to do. Then advocates and smaller countries lobbied the governing countries at international meetings. They held protests all over the world – in the United States, France, New Zealand,

Germany, Australia, the United Kingdom, Chile, and Brazil. They lobbied individuals, ministries, departments, and federal governments. They got help from celebrities, grabbed media attention, and mobilized their members

After a final agreement on Antarctic mining was adopted in 1988, it seemed that the cause was lost – until the French and Australian governments, responding to domestic environmentalist pressures, abruptly announced that they would not ratify. Thereafter, Australia, France, the famous figure Jacques-Yves Cousteau led the entire coalition toward environmental protection for Antarctica, lobbying the U.S. Congress and the reluctant administration of President George H. W. Bush in the process. U.S. policy was reversed, and in 1991, the countries that governed Antarctica signed the Madrid Protocol on Environmental Protection. That agreement pre-emptively, and successfully, protected an *entire continent* from mining.

Lessons from Antarctica Battles

What lessons can we draw from this extraordinary feat?

- When international pacts require consensus, smaller states can effectively shift environmental debates, even when the most powerful countries seem set on a destructive course.
- When it comes to resource exploitation, governments need not always be beholden to markets. They can be convinced to take steps against the interests of big oil and mining.
- Environmental organizations can and must combine targeted domestic lobbying with transnational fundraising and public relations campaigns. Raising awareness is important, but changes in national policies must follow.
- Governments and environmentalists can successfully work with celebrity ambassadors like Cousteau to mobilize enough political pressure for real policy change.

Perhaps the biggest lesson of the Antarctic anti-mining campaign is that history matters and – understood correctly it can help and inspire. A deeper understanding of past environmental movements and diplomacy suggests effective tools and strategies people can use today to combat the most difficult environmental problem the world has ever faced – the challenge of slowing the Antarctic ice melt before it inundates New York and other world cities.

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Read more in Emma Shortis, “‘Who Can Resist This Guy?’ Jacques Cousteau, Celebrity Diplomacy, and the Environmental Protection of the Antarctic” *Australian Journal of Politics and History* 61, no. 3 (2015): 363-378.