Report | First Antarctic Parliamentarian’s Assembly puts Climate Change at top of Agenda

The first ever Antarctic Parliamentarians Assembly hosted by the UK’s All-Party Parliamentary Group for the Polar Regions in London concluded with a warning from parliamentary delegates of “potentially catastrophic” effects of climate change on Antarctica. Plastics, fisheries and tourism were also highlighted with Parliamentarians noting the anticipated continued increase in tourism and its potential impacts on Antarctic ecosystems.

The meeting, at the Royal United Services Institute (RUSI) on Whitehall, London on December 2 and 3, was convened to mark the 60th anniversary of the signing of the Antarctic Treaty and discuss the protection and preservation of the white continent, with 19 parliamentarians and delegates representing 13 countries, present. The Assembly provided a valuable learning opportunity for parliamentarians, rather than governments, to enable them to pressure their national legislatures to support the work of the Antarctic Treaty.

The first day, attended by IAATO’s Director of Environment and Science Coordination Amanda Lynnes and Communications and Engagement Manager, Hayley Collings aimed to inform parliamentarians about the importance of Antarctica for our planet. It featured scene-setting presentations from Lord Ahmad, UK Minister for the Polar Regions, Dame Jane Francis, Director of British Antarctic Survey and Jane Rumble, head the UK Foreign and Commonwealth Office’s Polar Regions Department before moving on to a series of lectures by scientists and experts.

Professor Klaus Dodds, Royal Holloway University, UK gave delegates a presentation on the Geopolitics and Governance in Antarctica. Professor Tim Naish, University of Wellington, New Zealand, delivered a sobering description of how climate change is affecting Antarctica and what it means for us and Professor Steven Chown, Monash University, Australia and President of the Scientific Committee on Antarctic Research demonstrated how global warming is changing life in Antarctica and the Southern Ocean including permitting invasive species to thrive in Antarctica and the sub-Antarctic islands. Both professors highlighted rising CO² and sea levels and the urgent need to reduce carbon emissions to avoid devastating impacts on human populations and the natural world. Birgit Njåstad, Head of the Antarctic Programme at the Norwegian Polar Institute and current Chair of the Committee for Environment Protection (CEP) warned that such changes and pressures impede future proofing of the Antarctic environment, but that this can be softened by filling knowledge gaps and Antarctic Treaty System mechanisms and tools.

Dr Daniela Portella Sampaio, University of Leeds, UK spoke about whether Antarctic tourism can support environmental protection and the role of ambassadorship. Her talk included an enlightening overview of IAATO’s evolution and how its role in the Antarctic Treaty System has helped deliver safe,
environmentally responsible tourism. Daniela provided the assembly with IAATO’s official visitor figures noting that seaborne Antarctic visitor numbers are anticipated to increase by 40% in the 2019-20 season. Parliamentarians reaffirmed their commitment to ‘ensuring that tourism is conducted strictly in a safe, environmentally responsible manner’ in accordance with the Antarctic Treaty.

The meeting concluded on day two with a consensus statement signed by all 19 parliamentary delegates and in part echoing IAATO’s mission and vision.

Of particular interest to IAATO, the statement declared, that, as a group of parliamentarians from Antarctic Treaty Parties, they were committed to ensuring effective management of activities in Antarctica noting that tourism is conducted strictly in a safe, environmentally responsible manner, including through the implementation of all tourism-related Antarctic Treaty Consultative Meeting (ATCM) Measures. They encouraged their parliaments to adopt, where appropriate, additional national legislation contributing to the full and effective implementation of the Antarctic Treaty System. These declarations also echoed IAATO’s advice to the ATCM and CEP in Prague, 2019.

Click here to view the conference brochure and delegate biographies. You can review some of the presentations here.

End

Report authors
Hayley Collings, Communications and Engagement Manager
Amanda Lynnes, Director of Environment and Science Coordination