



ANTARCTICA NEW ZEALAND INFORMATION SHEET

HISTORY OF THE ROSS DEPENDENCY

The Ross Dependency is the wedge-shaped part of Antarctica claimed by New Zealand. It is over 3000 kilometres south of New Zealand and takes in Ross Island, the Ross Sea, the Ross Ice Shelf, the Transantarctic Mountains and part of the continent extending to the South Pole.

Early Explorers

Captain Cook's expedition in 1773 circumnavigated Antarctica in two tiny ships and although he suspected land existed, he did not sight it. The Russian Bellinghausen also explored below 60°S and is thought to be the first to sight land in 1821.

Early explorer's efforts were directed at reaching the South Magnetic Pole. The British naval officer James Ross led an expedition, which in 1841 found a way through the ice of the Ross Sea and discovered the Ross Ice Shelf. They landed on Possession Island and mapped some of the coastline and islands. They observed Mount Erebus but could not find a safe place for the ships to winter-over, so did not stay long enough to explore further.

The explorer's accounts of whales and seals stimulated interest in trips to Antarctica and the Southern Ocean, and it was whalers and sealers who were the most frequent visitors to the area for many years.

Scientific Expeditions

The first scientific expedition to stay on the Antarctic continent was led by a Norwegian-born Australian called Carsten Borchgrevink in 1899 at Cape Adare. Huts were erected for the team to winter-over and sledding trips with dogs were made. Magnetic observations and a meteorological record were taken, and new zoological discoveries were made. Primus stoves and dehydrated vegetables were used for the first time on this expedition.

A more ambitious expedition was planned by the British, led by Captain Robert Scott in the ship Discovery. A building was erected at Hut Point, near present-day McMurdo Station, and the Discovery was frozen in for the winters of 1902 and 1903.

The party made important scientific observations and undertook exploratory trips man-hauling sledges over the ice in addition to dog sledding trips. An attempt was made to reach the South Pole by Scott, Wilson and Shackleton. The dogs did not perform well, their food supplies were insufficient and Shackleton suffered badly from scurvy. They turned back at 82°16' south. Other journeys, including the first trip onto the polar ice cap and exploration of the Ferrar Glacier, were made in the two seasons of the expedition's stay in Antarctica.

Ernest Shackleton returned with his own expedition in 1908, determined to reach the South Pole. He headed south from Lyttelton aboard the Nimrod, which was towed to just north of the Antarctic Circle by another ship. Shackleton also took ponies, a 15 hp motor car and plenty of dried vegetables in the hope of preventing scurvy.

The party erected a pre-fabricated hut at Cape Royds. Six men climbed Mount Erebus and short sledding trips were undertaken in preparation for the journey to the South Pole. In October four men set out with ponies, which were not particularly successful at crossing crevasses! One was lost and the remainder shot and cached for food. Food supplies dwindled and with only 180 kilometres to go they decided to turn back. They had walked a total of 2730 kilometres.

A second party had meanwhile reached the South Magnetic Pole for the first time by man-hauling sledges. It was an incredible feat of endurance by Edgeworth David, Mawson and MacKay, which took 122 days and covered 2000 kilometres. It is still considered one of the great sledding trips undertaken in the Ross Sea region.

Scott's Second Expedition

Scott still wanted to be the first to reach the South Pole and claim it for Britain. He returned to Antarctica in 1911 in the ship the Terra Nova, with ponies, dogs, three crawler tractors and a huge quantity of stores; including one tonne of oatmeal, 17 tonnes of flour and six tonnes of dog biscuits. New Zealand contributed 600 tonnes of coal, 180 sheep and 1585 kilograms of butter.

They erected a building for over-wintering at Cape Evans and began laying depots for the South Pole trip as well as making scientific observations. In the following spring, Scott and his party set off. Ponies and dogs pulled sledges with supplies as part of the support team. The tractors were abandoned after continually breaking down. The final group man-hauled the sledges towards the South Pole.

Exhausted by the cold, inadequate food and the physically demanding work, Scott, Wilson, Oates, Evans and Bowers reached the South Pole only to find a Norwegian party led by Roald Amundsen had beaten them. They were bitterly disappointed. Evans died early on the return journey and Oates developed severe frostbite. All were weak and sick. They pitched camp in a blizzard on about March 16, 1912 and Oates made his now-famous remark as he left the tent, "I am just going outside, and may be some time." His companions struggled on for a few more days trying to reach the next food depot in appalling weather conditions. They failed to reach the depot and died when their fuel and food ran out on 31 March 1912.

Amundsen, unlike Scott, was an experienced polar explorer and meticulous in his preparations. He chose a shorter route to the South Pole from the Bay of Whales and was competent in his use of dogs and skis. He had lighter equipment and better food.

Although Scott's expedition is famous for its heroic attempt on the South Pole, it should also be remembered for the valuable scientific observations and exploratory work it achieved.

Scott's Northern Party, led by Campbell, wintered at Cape Adare in 1911, then after exploratory trips was forced to spend a second winter trapped in an ice cave on Inexpressible Island.

A small Japanese expedition, led by Lt. Nobu Shirase during 1910-1911 had also hoped to reach the South Pole. However, they realised that they did not have enough time and visited King Edward VII Land instead.

Shackleton Returns

One other major feat of exploration remained - the crossing of the continent. Shackleton returned to Antarctica with this ambition in 1914, with two parties and two ships. One party went to the Ross Sea side to begin laying depots. Shackleton with the main party was to begin the crossing from the Weddell Sea.

The entire expedition was a disaster. Shackleton's ship, the *Endurance*, was crushed by ice in the Weddell Sea, forcing the crew to camp on ice floes and then make an epic journey in an open boat to get help. The Ross Sea party's ship, the *Aurora*, was blown out to sea from Cape Evans in a blizzard and went back to New Zealand, marooning the depot-laying party for two winters on Ross Island without adequate supplies. Both parties were eventually rescued after incredible survival stories and without achieving their goal.

This was the last major land-based exploration of the so-called "heroic era" in what is now the Ross Dependency.

The huts left by these explorers still stand and the Antarctic Heritage Trust has taken on the job of conserving the buildings and their contents, largely preserved by the cold, dry air.

New Zealand and the Ross Dependency

Many ships seeking whales and seals visited the Southern Ocean and may have touched the shores of Antarctica. They did not tell anyone else, as they wanted to keep the places where they found them secret.

The United Kingdom officially declared its claim to the Ross Dependency in 1923 when whalers became interested in the Ross Sea region. Whale stocks in the Antarctic Peninsula area had been exhausted and new hunting grounds were sought. Britain's claim was based on the discoveries by Ross in 1841 and by Scott and Shackleton in 1902-03, 1908-09 and 1911-12. The Dependency's administration was handed over to New Zealand through an official Order-in-Council in 1923. The New Zealand Government found itself in charge of a large part of Antarctica and benefited from whaling licence fees until 1928.

Mechanised Exploration

A new era of exploration began in 1928 when flights were first made over Antarctica Peninsula by Hubert Wilkins, an Australian. Richard Byrd, an American, established a large base, Little America, at the Bay of Whales near the Ross Ice Shelf and made many more flights with three aircraft, discovering new mountains and flying over the Pole for the first time. Dog-sledding trips were also made. Much valuable scientific work was done on Byrd's subsequent expeditions. He also encouraged US Government involvement in Antarctica, and cold-climate training was undertaken by the military there in 1946.

Planning for establishment of stations in Antarctica for the International Geophysical Year triggered an intensive phase of exploration around the whole continent beginning in 1955-56. A base (which later became McMurdo Station when Little America closed down) was established on Ross Island near

Scott's hut. Scott Base was built nearby by the New Zealand Government the following summer and in 1957-58, the International Geophysical Year, valuable research was begun in an atmosphere of co-operation which eventually led to the formation of the Antarctic Treaty.

Sir Edmund Hillary, leader at Scott Base at the time, became the first person to drive to the South Pole. He used converted farm tractors. His team laid depots for the Commonwealth Transantarctic Expedition, led by Vivian Fuchs, which crossed the continent for the first time in 1958.

Modern Explorers

Other remarkable expeditions have since crossed Antarctica. Sir Ranulph Fiennes, Charles Burton and Oliver Shepard crossed Antarctica via the South Pole during their circumnavigation of the Earth via both poles. The journey took 67 days and despite the advantages of motorised skidoos, it was still an arduous and dangerous challenge.

Reinhold Messner (an Italian) and Arved Fuchs (a German) crossed Antarctica in 92 days hauling plastic sledges in 1989-90. They had only one resupply depot - on the first leg to the South Pole.

The fourth crossing of the continent was completed by American Will Steger and his party in 1990. Seventy-six years after Shackleton's attempt, Steger's party was the first to complete the journey using dogs. They also made the longest trip - 6400 kilometres compared with 3470 kilometres of the first party.

Fiennes and Dr Michael Stroud made the first unsupported crossing of Antarctica in 1992.

Many other parties, and even people travelling alone, have attempted trips to the Pole, or across the continent. The difficulty of these modern journeys, even with lightweight equipment and modern means of communication, is a testament to the incredible vision and physical and mental ability of the explorers of the "heroic era."

FURTHER READING

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