

A brief overview of New Zealand's involvement in Antarctica from 1923

Britain claimed the Ross Dependency on the 30 July 1923 and placed it into the care of New Zealand. The Dependency was named for Sir James Clark Ross who led the first expedition into the Ross Sea in January 1843. The Dependency lies between 150° west and 160° east, and includes Ross Island, the site of New Zealand's permanent Antarctic base named after Robert Falcon Scott (1868-1912).

Scott Base is situated on Pram Point at the end of Hut Point Peninsula on Ross Island. It was built in 1957 as the Ross Island base for the British Trans-Antarctic Expedition (TAE). The New Zealand government took responsibility for the Ross Sea Party of the TAE led by Sir Edmund Hillary while Dr Vivian Fuchs led the British party which traversed from the Weddell Sea via the South Pole to McMurdo Sound and Scott Base.

Scott Base was also used for science activities associated with the International Geophysical Year (IGY) between 1 July 1957 and 31 December 1958. Sir Edmund Hillary was the first Scott Base commander and Trevor Hatherton the scientific leader. During the IGY international scientists were invited to work at Antarctic bases run by other countries. The aim was to stimulate joint scientific achievements in a spirit of cooperation and peace between countries. The IGY was also a test case to show that international cooperation could be successful at the time of the Cold War.

In 1958 America proposed a treaty that would continue the spirit of cooperation that characterised the IGY. The Antarctic Treaty was signed on 1 December 1959 by the twelve governments (including New Zealand) that had an active interest in Antarctica. The Treaty came fully into force on 23 June 1961 and was initially binding for thirty years, being renewed after 1991. There are now 45 consultative parties to the Antarctic Treaty and they have been instrumental in establishing guidelines and protocols for protection of Antarctic flora, fauna, and historic sites, the conduct and operations of bases, scientific activities, and tourism. New Zealand has consistently maintained a position at the forefront of Antarctic Treaty initiatives. In 1999 a landmark agreement was signed by all Treaty parties. The Protocol on Environmental Protection to the Antarctic Treaty designated Antarctica as a natural reserve devoted to peace and science and committed parties to the comprehensive protection of the Antarctic environment. Significantly, the Protocol provided a resolution, at least in the medium term, to the question of mining in Antarctica, providing for a 50-year ban on all mineral resource activity.

Scott Base became a permanent base in 1959/60 and was run and maintained by the New Zealand Antarctic Programme (NZAP) under the auspices of the Department of Scientific and Industrial Research (DSIR). In 1992 NZAP became the responsibility of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs & Trade. In 1994 there was a further review of New Zealand's involvement in Antarctica. The review focused on New Zealand's role and the institutional arrangement best suited to fulfil New Zealand's objectives for its Antarctic engagement, in particular whether New Zealand should continue to invest in Antarctica and to commit towards building a significant reputation based primarily on an

investment in science. The review highlighted the influence Antarctic issues had beyond just science and logistics and on the strategic importance of Antarctica and the Southern Ocean to New Zealand as a Southern Hemisphere nation.

On 1 July 1996, the New Zealand Antarctic Institute, operating as Antarctica New Zealand, was created through an act of parliament. The organisation's principal functions are the development, management and execution of New Zealand activities in respect of Antarctica, the maintenance and enhancement of the quality of New Zealand scientific research and national and international cooperation in Antarctic matters.

There is also a strong policy focus through the Officials Antarctic committee (OAC) of which Antarctica New Zealand is a full member, and the Antarctic Policy Unit (APU) of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade. The OAC, chaired by the APU, coordinates policy advice on Antarctic matters to the government and includes members from governmental departments with an interest or role in Antarctic affairs.