

Antarctica Month starts tomorrow

Celebrating research on the coldest, driest, and loneliest continent

Pretoria, 31 May 2006: In an ongoing campaign to highlight South Africa's world-class research and scientific contributions, the Department of Science & Technology (DST) identified four** science focus areas to be promoted during the year. June has been declared Antarctica Month.

According to Dr Tshepo Seekoe, Manager of the Science Platforms Unit at DST, "The mission of the South African Antarctic Programme (SANAP) is to increase our understanding of the natural environment and life in the area through appropriate research, science and technology. South Africa increasingly recognises the importance of Antarctic research to understanding global scientific problems."

Two government departments are joining hands in managing South Africa's Antarctic initiative. DST, through the National Research Foundation (NRF), is responsible for scientific research while the Department of Environment and Tourism (DEA&T) takes care of logistical management.

SANAP research includes Antarctica, the Prince Edward Islands (including Marion Island and Prince Edward Island), Gough Island and parts of the Southern Ocean.

"DST, together with its stakeholders, wants to increase the number of students in the SANAP; not only from pure science disciplines but also from social science disciplines. Hence, during this month, DST aims to inform South Africans, especially students, why our researchers work on Antarctica, what their research entails, and what the benefits are to our country of having a basis on this continent. Antarctica is an unspoiled laboratory that provides some key pointers of global climate change, planetary weather and untainted biology.

"SANA IV, the South African basis on Antarctica, offers a well-resourced facility for the observation of various natural phenomena occurring in space, in the atmosphere or the electromagnetic field surrounding the earth, as well as in the crust of the earth itself. Auroras, solar winds and the ozone layer are some of the subjects of this research – with direct relevance to the navigation and communication systems upon which we have become so dependent. Geological investigations help to unravel the evolution of Gondwanaland, while meteorological and oceanographic observations provide clues to the process of global climate change. These are just some of the ways in which Antarctica offers a window on the past, present and future of our world," Seekoe adds.

Antarctica Month also coincides with the time when, true to Antarctic tradition, the nine South Africans based on the coldest, driest, and loneliest continent will celebrate the winter solstice, which marks the mid-point of almost three months of polar night, when the sun never rises above the horizon.

In South Africa, activities such as exhibitions, public talks, learner workshops, and science shows will take place across provinces.

More detailed information is available from <http://www.saasta.ac.za/antarctica/index.shtml>.

Ends.

Further information:

- For print; photos and other materials such as cartoons are available.
- For radio; a list of scientists is available for interview purposes.
- Interviews can also be set up with the team currently in Antarctica. However, please allow sufficient time for these to be set up.

For more information and assistance with the above, please contact:

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**** The remaining three science focus months are:** Biosciences Month (marine sciences) in August; African Origins Month (palaeontology) in September; and Astronomy Month in October.