



Keeping in touch: New Zealand's Antarctic environmental officer Emma Waterhouse talks to a colleague in her country's Scott Base, using a satellite phone link from Sanae IV. In the background is radio operator Franz Hoffmann

'Ice men' praised for sound environment practices

ENVIRONMENT REPORTER

The environmental commitment of the "ice men" working at South Africa's new Sanae IV base in Antarctica is impressive, according to an off-the-cuff assessment by a visiting New Zealand observer.

Emma Waterhouse, environmental programme manager for New Zealand's Antarctic programme, visited Sanae IV last month at the invitation of the Department of Environmental Affairs, in terms of the joint agreement signed last November by President Mandela and New Zealand Prime Minister Jim Bolger.

New Zealand, which operates Scott Base in the Ross Sea area of Antarctica on the opposite side of the continent to Dronning Maud Land where Sanae IV has been built, is considered one of the "shining lights" in the application of the Antarctic Treaty System's Madrid Protocol – the 1991 environmental protection protocol.

Because of this, Ms Waterhouse's formal assessment of the environmental aspects of South Africa's operation in Antarctica is being awaited with keen interest.

Although South Africa ratified the Madrid Protocol only in 1995, the construction of the new base at Vesleskarvet has been subject to an official Environmental, Health and Safety Management Plan since its start in 1993.

Key objectives of this plan include environmental training for all personnel working there, and the return of virtually all waste – including all human waste – to South Africa.

For example, by the end of last year's construction season, 45 tons of construction waste packed in crates had been returned, as were 500 drums (200-litre capacity) containing 2,74 tons of metal and 1,2 tons of glass, amongst other waste.

And this summer already, some 28 tons of construction waste have been packed

into 57 crates and separate waste into 270 drums, ready for shipment back to South Africa.

Petrus Gildenhuys, South Africa's Antarctica environmental manager, said there had been "a remarkable improvement" at Sanae IV each year for the past three years, both in terms of the reduction, collection and return of the waste as well as the attitude of those working at the base.

"The first year I was here it was quite a nightmare because we didn't know how to contain all the waste – but we've got it well under control now," he said.

"Education is very important, and we go through all the environmental arrangements with everyone coming in here.

"There's no training programme in South Africa that can prepare people for this."

Experience gained and lessons learned during the construction phase of Sanae IV would be used to further develop the environmental management efforts of South

Africa's National Antarctic Programme, which also applies at Gough and Marion Islands, Mr Gildenhuys said.

"An environmental management system is no guarantee of instant rectification of unsound environmental impacts, but rather a processed change.

"Commitment from the entire management component and the co-operation of every person involved with Sanae IV is needed to keep the environmental impact at Vesleskarvet negligible."

Ms Waterhouse, a 28-year-old science graduate who also has a master's degree in resource management, is compiling an official report on the environmental policies and procedures being applied at Sanae IV, and was reluctant to comment fully before submitting it to South Africa's Antarctic managers.

But she described her visit as "great" and said South Africa appeared to be making a major effort to run an environmentally-friendly operation.