

INFORMATION SHEET

THE PROPOSED LANDING STRIP ON MARION ISLAND

BACKGROUND

The Prince Edward Islands, comprising Marion Island (290 km²) and Prince Edward Island (44 km²) lie some 19 km apart at approximately 47°S, 38°E in the south Indian Ocean. They are part of the Republic of South Africa, sovereignty being declared through annexation in January 1948. A station, initially for meteorological observations, has been maintained on Marion Island since annexation. From the mid-1960s the station has developed gradually into what is today a well equipped scientific station capable of supporting up to 30 persons over-winter, and nearly double that number for shorter periods of time such as during the twice annual relief periods lasting up to six weeks each. Scientific research on and around the islands is organized and supported logistically under the auspices of the South African National Antarctic Research Programme (SANARP).

THE PROPOSAL

The Department of Environment Affairs (DEA), which is responsible for the administration of the Prince Edward Island territory and whose Antarctic Division is responsible for the logistical support of the South African National Antarctic Research Programme (SANARP), proposed the construction of a landing strip on Marion Island. The reasons that have been given for this by the DEA are:

1. To provide rapid attention to or evacuation of injured or sick personnel.
2. To provide surveillance and rescue aircraft with an alternative landing place.
3. To enable better control of territorial waters and the fishing zone around the islands.
4. To enable provisioning of the station with emergency supplies.

and the motivations are the following;

- during the four years up to and including 1985 it was necessary to conduct four evacuations of sick/injured persons by ship, and one parachute drop of emergency medical supplies,

- the Cape Sea Route is an important and busy one. While most passages around the Cape take place within about 100 nautical miles of the coast some, especially yachts not calling at Cape Town, prefer a more southerly passage,
- volcanic activity resumed on Marion Island in 1980, this being the first known activity in living memory. Significant though not major outpourings of lava occurred in the central upper and western coastal regions of Marion Island. The base station is on the coast on the eastern side and was not in any way threatened by these outpourings. However, since the islands lie on an active fracture zone in the ocean floor, hence their existence in the first place, it is reasonable to expect further activity sooner or later,
- an alternative landing place for search and rescue aircraft has been a long felt need.

A preliminary feasibility study by a firm of consulting civil engineers has been undertaken. A possible site for a runway (1 400 - 1 800 m long, 30 m wide) to cater for aircraft up to the size of a Hercules C130 transport plane, was identified on Marion Island. It lies a few kilometres south of the station atop a stony ridge south of and above the 'Albatross Lakes' area.

ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACT ASSESSMENT

The DEA has commissioned an independent environmental impact assessment, to be conducted prior to a decision being taken on whether to proceed or not with the proposal (see attached press statement by the Minister for Environment and Water Affairs, 29 December 1986).

A 5-member Panel has been formed to conduct this. Its members are Dr G Heymann (convenor of the Panel and Chairman of SA's SCAR National Committee), Prof T Erasmus (zoologist), Mr B J Huntley (ecologist), Prof G de F Retief (coastal and ocean engineer) and Dr A C Liebenberg (consulting marine and civil engineer). The Antarctic Programme office of the Foundation for Research Development (FRD) of the Council for Scientific and Industrial Research (CSIR) will provide the support services for the Panel, the persons responsible for this being Dr P R Condy and Mr O A van der Westhuysen.

The procedure being followed by the Panel is as follows:

1. Submissions to the Panel on the proposal have been invited from some 30 sources (individuals and groups) who are or have been engaged in activities (scientific or logistical) at the islands over the past 10 - 15 years. These include biologists (botanists, entomologists, limnologists, mammalogists, marine biologists, ornithologists), engineers, geologists, volcanologists, geophysicists, logisticians and meteorologists.

2. The Panel and various other technical experts (aviation experts, design and construction engineers, etc) will visit the island for 7-10 days in February 1987 for on site inspections.
3. The Panel will hold discussions with members of current and past expeditions to the island, and with other persons/parties as the need arises.
4. In the light of its findings through 1 to 3 above and its examination of the reasons given for the proposal, the Panel will submit its report to DEA in March 1987.

The Panel's report to DEA will be subjected to independent review ('audit') by an invited expert from abroad (Dr W N Bonner, UK), who will visit South Africa to do this so that he can consult with the Panel and others as he deems appropriate. His report will be submitted independently to DEA. This process is expected to take place in March/April 1987.

Thereafter, the DEA is expected to make a decision on whether or not to proceed with the proposal, and if so how and under what environmental controls.

The Panel's report, as well as that of the independent reviewer, will not be confidential though common courtesy requires that they be submitted to DEA before public release by the DEA.

G HEYMANN

Panel Chairman
28 January 1987

P30.programme

IMPACT EVALUATION OF A POSSIBLE LANDING
FACILITY ON MARION ISLAND

As a result of confusing reports which have appeared in the media, I consider it necessary to clarify the situation and place matters in perspective.

The responsibility for Marion Island and related functions were transferred to the Department of Environment Affairs during October 1985. An aspect which received the early attention of the new management was the high costs involved in servicing the island in emergency situations. During the past 4 years it was necessary to mount four emergency voyages.

The Department is also responsible for the control of fishing in South African waters. The fishing zone ~~award~~^{around} Marion Island, which is South African territory, receives very little attention at present and control in the zone must of necessity be upgraded to a considerable extent. It is also clear that much more information is required about the fishing potential of that region. It seems likely that people will in future pay more regular visits to the island and that the need for better and more reliable contact will be of growing importance. Furthermore search and rescue operations necessitate that a ~~th~~^grough study be made of the possibility of providing a usable landing facility in the area.

For some time now the idea of providing a landing strip of some sort on the island has been bandied about, particularly with a view to facilitating the movement of personnel. Because I am aware of the sensitivity of the environment of Marion Island, I approved, as a first step, that a ~~th~~^grough ecological evaluation of the construction of a landing strip on Marion Island be undertaken.

Consequently I decided that an environmental impact evaluation should be done completely independent of the Department. To this end a Working Group of ~~re~~^grecognized scientists from various disciplines has been established, one of whom is from abroad. The Working Group is under the

leadership of Dr G Heyman, Vice President of the CSIR and chairman of the South African Scientific Committee for Antarctic Research.

I wish to emphasize that the findings of the Working Group will be decisive in the decision-making process as to whether a landing facility will be provided or not on Marion Island.

ISSUED BY MINISTER J W E WILEY,
MINISTER OF ENVIRONMENT AFFAIRS AND OF WATER AFFAIRS
29 DECEMBER 1986

IMPAKEVALUERING VAN MOONTLIKE VLIEGTUIGLANDINGSTROOK

TE MARIONEILAND

As gevolg van verwarrende berigte wat in die nuus media verskyn het, is dit vir my nodig om sake duidelik in perspektief te stel.

Die verantwoordelikheid vir Marioneiland en verwante aangeleenthede is gedurende Oktober 1985 aan die Departement van Omgewingsake oorgedra. Een aspek wat onder die aandag van die nuwe bestuur gebring is, is die hoë koste wat in die verlede aangegaan is om die eiland tydens noodsituasies te bereik. In die afgelope vier jaar is reeds by vier geleenthede noodvaarte na die eiland onderneem.

Die Departement is verder belas met die beheer oor visseryaangeleenthede in Suid-Afrikaanse waters. Die vissery sone rondom Marioneiland, wat RSA grondgebied is, geniet tans minimale aandag en beheer aldaar moet noodsaaklikerwyse opgeskerp word. Hierbenewens is dit nodig om baie meer kennis op te doen oor die vispotensiaal in dié gebied. Dit wil dus blyk dat 'n groter aantal mense meer gereeld op die eiland gevestig sal moet word en dat meer en makliker kontak wenslik is. Verder noodsaak soek- en reddingspogings deeglike ondersoek na die moontlike aanbring van 'n bruikbare aanloopbaan in die omgewing.

Vir geruime tyd word reeds besin oor die wenslikheid om 'n vliegtuiglandingstrook op Marioneiland met die oog daarop om plasing van personeel aldaar te kan vergemaklik. Omdat ek terdeë bewus is van die omgewingsensitiwiteit van Marioneiland, het ek as eerste stap goedgekeur dat 'n deeglike ekologiese waardering vir 'n landingstrook op Marioneiland uitgevoer word.

Ek het derhalwe gelas dat die impakwaardering onafhanklik van die Departement uitgevoer word. Vir die doel het ek 'n werkgroep aangestel wat bestaan uit vier erkende wetenskaplikes uit verskillende vakdissiplines - waaronder een buitelanders. Die werkgroep sal onder leiding van dr G Heymann, Adjunk-president van die WNNR en Voorsitter van die Suid-Afrikaanse Wetenskaplike Komitee vir Antarktiese Navorsing, staan.

Ek wil dit beklemtoon dat die werkgroep se bevindings deurslaggewend sal wees in die besluitnemings proses of 'n aanloopbaan wel op Marioneiland gebou sal word al dan nie.

UITGEREIK DEUR MINISTER J W E WILEY,
MINISTER VAN OMGEWINGSAKE EN VAN WATERWESE
29 DESEMBER 1986