Commission highlights EU contribution to International Polar Year

As scientists around the world embark on the International Polar Year, the European Commission highlighted the EU's contribution to this huge international scientific undertaking with a two day symposium, held, appropriately enough, at the Belgian Museum of Natural Sciences. ...
'In the North Pole, the Arctic Ocean will be ice-free in summer by 2060 if the current warming trends continue,' he commented. 'This will not only affect the four million people living in that area. It will also affect many others, including here in Europe: in terms of our climate, our ecosystems and our living conditions.'

The poles are also a vital source of information on what the climate was like in the past. Commissioner Potocnik likened them to an environmental library, providing information on changes in climate, ecosystems and societies. 'They give us a clue as to what will happen in the next stage of climate change, from previous examples,' he said.

One of the most important EU-funded projects looking at past climates is EPICA (the European Project for Ice Coring in Antartica). By drilling down through the 3,270m thick ice sheet at the Dome C site in East Antarctica, the partners have managed to obtain ice cores containing information on the atmosphere going back 650,000 years, longer than any other atmospheric record.

Another EU-funded project which forms a major part of the EU's contribution to the IPY is DAMOCLES (Developing Arctic Modelling and Observing Capabilities for Long-term Environmental Studies), which is investigating the impacts of reduced ice cover in the Arctic on both the environment and people.

European collaboration on polar research will also be given a boost by the European Polar Consortium (EUROPOLAR). This EU-funded project brings together 25 ministries and funding agencies from 19 countries including Russia. The critical mass of these funding sources will allow the project to support large scale projects and also help Europe coordinate its Polar research activities with other major partners such as the US and Canada.

'Europe has important strategic interests in the polar region, for science, foreign policy, trade and security,' commented Paul Egerten of EUROPOLAR. 'The international Polar Year represents an opportunity for Europe to deepen and broaden its international partnerships.'

David Carlson, Director of the International Polar Year’s Programme Office, was enthusiastic about European involvement in IPY projects; of over 200 projects officially registered to the IPY, just 16 do not have European involvement. For Professor Carlson, one of the biggest challenges of the IPY will be managing the vast amounts of data collected during the year. Meeting this challenge will require a shared, flexible, accessible catalogue, with a clear data citation system to ensure that data providers get credit for their work. Professor Carlson also called for universal and affordable access to the relevant literature.

Elisabeth Lipiatou, Head of the Climate Change and Environmental Risks Unit at the
European Commission's DG Research, highlighted the opportunities for polar researchers under the Seventh Framework Programme (FP7). 'Many of the first call topics under the sub-activity 'Pressures on environment and climate' will contribute to research in the Polar regions,' she said. These include the stability of the thermohaline circulation, studies of the carbon cycle and climate change impacts on biodiversity and ecosystems. Dr Lipiatou also presented a publication outlining current projects funded by the Commission in the field of Polar environmental and climate research.

The urgency of the situation at the poles and the need for the International Polar Year was clear in all the presentations. 'Today’s event shows that climate research can make a difference and make that difference soon,' said Commissioner Potocnik, adding that just as humankind was responsible for climate change, it was also up to humankind to solve the problem. 'Failing is not an option,' he warned.

Countries

Antarctica

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