



SCAR Fellowship Report

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Framing Antarctica as Fragile: Tracing the evolution of media narratives about the far south (1945 – 2015)



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Introduction

I applied for a SCAR fellowship to conduct research in an area adjacent to my existing expertise, and because I wanted to forge connections with the strong group of Humanities and Social Science (HASS)-based polar researchers who are based in Sweden. My PhD project examined how Antarctica has been represented in advertising material. During the project I realized that media materials such as historical magazines also contain a wealth of information in the form of articles and images. The topic “Framing Antarctica as Fragile” was chosen to complement existing work by Peder Roberts, namely *Greening the Poles: Science, the Environment, and the Creation of the Modern Arctic and Antarctic (GRETPOLE)*, which was funded by a European Research Council Starting Grant (2017-2022).

Project Objectives

The proposed project aimed to analyse representations of Antarctica in the media, in order to gain an understanding of how popular attitudes towards the continent have evolved over time. Where once Antarctica was seen as a hostile and dangerous environment to be conquered by humans, the dominant paradigm now casts the continent as needing protection. The project proposed to examine how the idea of “fragility” manifests not only in a policy setting, but also the realm of cultural production, and to trace the links between public opinion, policy, and protection over the past 70 years, using historical media sources.

Methods, Execution and Results

Using archival editions of *TIME* and *Life* magazines, I collected articles and images published 1945 – 2015 that featured the Polar Regions. The *TIME* Magazine Corpus indicated that the term “Antarctic” was particularly prevalent in *Time* magazine during the 1920s (91 occasions), while the term “Antarctica” occurred the most often in the 1990s (50 occasions). I used this to locate relevant articles and examine their content. Early mentions often related to exploration, or to Admiral Byrd’s expeditions, while environmental protection gained more attention (and a *TIME* cover article) in the 1990s, paralleling changes in environmental policy.

When I came across a number of articles and advertisement relating to the use of nuclear energy in Antarctica, I tightened the scope of the project. The PM-3A reactor (or “Nukey Poo”) that was present on Ross Island from 1961 to 1972 offered an ideal case study when considering the question of Antarctica’s fragility, as the rhetoric of techno-optimism when it was installed contrasted with the clean up effort that followed the decommissioning. The latter efforts preceded modern environmental protections, but offer an interesting case study in light of modern management of the Antarctic environment. I gathered historical materials about the reactor, including reports, newspaper and academic articles, documents relating to HSM designations, and relevant passages from books authored by well-known historical figures such as Admiral George Dufek, in order to build a picture of the reactor over its lifetime.

This shift in focus was influenced by interactions with colleagues at KTH Stockholm. The Division of History of Science, Technology, and Environment hosts several researchers with expertise in energy and nuclear history, and they were able to offer guidance as to how the Antarctic example fits into the global history of nuclear energy. I view this shift as positive, as it indicates that my own thinking has evolved, and I have been able to make connections with other areas of scholarship with which I was previously unfamiliar.

Project Outcomes

This most significant outcome from this project is the way the research opened the door for conversations about ways of viewing Antarctica in both academic and media contexts. By examining an episode in Antarctic history that has often been overlooked, the project generated public interest, such as a radio interview, and the sharing of a piece on *The Conversation*. It also contributed to wider Environmental History scholarship by introducing an Antarctic example and suggesting several ways of approaching the historical information gathered in order to interrogate it in more depth.

The most significant come for me personally is the expanded professional networks that I developed whilst on a SCAR Fellowship. It was useful to see how colleagues operate in a different institution. Conversations with both polar and non-polar researchers enriched my understanding of historical approaches, and helped me see connections with other fields of research. During the SCAR Fellowship I attended a number of workshops and forums at KTH Stockholm and elsewhere in Europe, and these offered a great opportunity to highlight contemporary Antarctic humanities work, and to connect with colleagues who had not previously considered how their work may interact with polar research.

Events Attended During Fellowship:

- APECS Sweden Polar Week Celebrations, KTH Stockholm (March 2018)
- Mini-symposium “Becoming with Alien Encounters” The Posthumanities Hub, Linköpings Universitet (5 April 2018)
- “Stories and Seed Film Forum: Wall-E” The Posthumanities Hub, KTH Stockholm (18 April 2018)
- “Polar Governance in Action: balancing multiple interests and values in the management of Arctic and Antarctic tourism” Royal Geographic Society London (24 April 2018)
- “RSS Discovery & Antarctica – A Conversation with Sue Ferrar” Discovery Point, Dundee (26 April 2018)
- POLAR2018 Conference, Davos (June 2018)

Publications, Presentations and Products

The fellowship resulted in multiple presentations and news items, as well as the manuscript for an academic article focused on the story of “Nukey Poo,” Antarctica’s only nuclear reactor. An article published on *The Conversation* website has had over 12,000 views, and generated much public interest. This short, public-facing article highlights the main points from the longer academic article, and can be found via <https://theconversation.com/remembering-antarcticas-nuclear-past-with-nukey-poo-99934>

Whilst in Sweden I also completed a chapter for the *Handbook of the Changing World Language Map*, entitled “Knowledge, Language, and Antarctica: Teaching, Studying, and Theorizing at the Ends of the Earth.” This chapter, which provides an introduction to the range of humanities and social sciences research that is undertaken in the Antarctic realm, and traces the development of the SCAR Standing Committee on Humanities and Socila Sciences (SC-HASS), benefitted from review feedback from Lize-Marié van der Watt at KTH Stockholm. The chapter, which was highlighted on the SCAR website as a research feature, is available via https://link.springer.com/referenceworkentry/10.1007%2F978-3-319-73400-2_123-1

Presentations Related to Fellowship Research:

- Scott Polar Research Institute, Cambridge, UK (23 April 2018)
 - <https://www.spri.cam.ac.uk/research/seminars/human/>
- Edinburgh Environmental Humanities, Edinburgh University, Scotland (27 April 2018)
 - <https://www.environmentalhumanities.ed.ac.uk/narrative-interviews-environmental-scientists-dr-saskia-beudel-university-canberra/>
- KTH Stockholm Research Talk, Sweden (21 May 2018)
- Bristol University, UK (29 May 2018)
- APECS Sweden Presentation, Sweden (June 2018)
- Oral Presentation “Framing Antarctica as Fragile: The Curious Case of Nukey Poo” at POLAR2018, Switzerland (23 June 2018)
- Oral Presentation “Antarctica and the Atomic Age: The Rise and Fall of Nukey Poo” at the Beyond Survival Symposium, Hobart, Australia (23 October 2018)

Capacity Building, Education and Outreach Activities

Prior to departing for Sweden I gave an interview with the ABC Hobart radio station, where I explained the purpose of the SCAR Fellowship scheme and detailed my plans when in Sweden, and was a great opportunity to highlight the wide range of humanities research that occurs in Antarctica and under the SCAR umbrella.

Whilst in Sweden I actively participated in the activities offered by APECS Sweden, and gave a presentation for local members about the SCAR Fellowship scheme, where I provided details on what it is for, and also presented my own research project. I was also invited to visit colleagues at other European Universities to give a talk about my research. These talks were open to the public, and were held in Cambridge and Bristol (UK) and Edinburgh (Scotland). Details are listed in the previous section.

Upon my return to Australia I participated in a SCAR-COMNAP-APECS webinar, where I shared my own experiences and provided advice to those preparing applications for the 2019 round. I have also included a slide about the SCAR Fellowship Scheme at the end of relevant lectures for university students who may have an interest in applying in future years. I also presented my research on “Nukey Poo” at one of the monthly “Pint of History” events in Hobart, which are held in a local brewery, and aim to connect the public to contemporary research on historical topics.

News Items Relating to Fellowship:

- University of Tasmania news item: <http://www.utas.edu.au/humanities/news/item/sweden-bound-on-antarctic-fellowship-hanne-nielsen>
- KTH Stockholm news item: <https://www.kth.se/blogs/hist/2018/04/scar-visitor-at-the-division/>
- Interview with ABC Hobart (March 2018) about SCAR Fellowship Project

Future Plans and Follow-ups

Following my SCAR Fellowship visit to Sweden (March – July 2018) I returned to Hobart, where I took up a contract with the UTAS English department, and lectured into the Antarctic Studies undergraduate course. I have remained in contact with Swedish colleagues, and I am grateful for ongoing suggestions from Professor Per Högselius, whose expertise in energy history enriched my own approach to the story of Nukey Poo. I hope to build on these connections with further collaborations that bring polar research to a wider audience. There is potential to expand the Nukey Poo project into a wider project about nuclear energy in remote locations, or to develop the initial article into a book length publication, with input from scholars in a range of disciplines. I have maintained contact with several other colleagues based at KTH Stockholm, both under the umbrella of the SCAR SC-HASS and online. These connections have also proved useful for me as the book reviews for *The Polar Journal* - early career colleagues whom I met in Sweden have subsequently reviewed HASS titles for the journal.

Personal Impact

Spending time in Sweden was a great way to broaden my academic horizons. The Division of History of Science, Technology and Environment at KTH Stockholm is home to scholars with a variety of disciplinary backgrounds, and the many visiting scholars enrich this further. I came into contact with scholars from neighboring disciplines who work on non-polar projects, and these discussions helped me sharpen the focus of my own Antarctic work. I also benefitted from spending time in Europe, where the concentration of research institutions is much higher than in Australia. This meant I was able to visit colleagues in the UK (University of Cambridge, University of Bristol, University of Edinburgh), and to present my SCAR Fellowship work at the POLAR2018 conference. These opportunities helped me to reinforce existing connections with scholars working in the Antarctic HASS space, and allowed me to make new connections with researchers in the wider fields of Environmental History and Environmental Humanities.

Financial Statement

The SCAR Fellowship was used to cover flights for travel to and from Sweden, and accommodation and transport costs in Stockholm for the four-month visit. Costings for these aligned with initial estimates in the SCAR Fellowship application. I also paid a subscription to *TIME* magazine in order to access the digital archive of past copies, which were used as a resource for this research project.

Acknowledgements and References:

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