

Historians working on Antarctica gather in Stellenbosch to preview SA archives

The first ever gathering in Africa of historians and archaeologists from around the world who focus on the Antarctic region, takes place from 26 to 29 July in Stellenbosch when the 7th international Scientific Committee for Antarctic Research (SCAR) History Workshop is hosted by Stellenbosch University (SU).

Workshop attendees will among others take note of successful efforts by its host, the Antarctic Legacy Project, to provide online archival databases containing the history of South African research endeavours in the Southern Ocean and Antarctic territories over the past six decades.

South Africa, through its South African National Antarctic Programme (SANAP), manages research bases on Antarctica, Gough Island and Marion Island, and is the only African country with involvement in the Antarctic region. The Antarctic Legacy Project is funded by the Department of Science and Technology through the agency of the National Research Foundation (NRF) and is run in association with the Department of Historical Studies and Animal Demography Unit at the University of Cape Town and the DST-NRF Centre of Excellence for Invasion Biology (CIB) based at Stellenbosch University.

Along the theme of “Antarctic History: Probing the Unknown”, the expected 20 workshop attendees from 10 countries will also reflect on current historical and archaeological research being done on the life of sealers and whalers working in the Antarctic region in the 19th century, ghost hunting, the wreckage of aeroplanes that crashed in the area, and various polar databases.

“The workshop is an opportunity for South African and international academics to discuss and critically evaluate how historians with Antarctic interests can most fruitfully use the growing accessibility of diverse source material to further research,” says Dr Cornelia Luedecke, who chairs the SCAR History committee.

Although still a work in progress, South Africa’s Antarctic Legacy Project is already proving to be a valuable addition to the pool of historic material that is contained in similar databases in Australia, the United Kingdom and the United States of America. The project aims to identify, digitise and archive historic records relevant to SANAP and to make it available to researchers and the public as a searchable online resource. With the support of the Department of Science and Technology through the agency of the National Research Foundation (NRF), more than 100 000 pages of historical records in the global public domain, including maps, drawings, and photographs, slides, diaries and oral history interviews will eventually be accessible.

The Department of Historical Studies and Animal Demography Unit at the University of Cape Town has been responsible for digitising more than 70 000 pages of relevant public records from various South African archives. These public archives will be available early next year at <http://sanap.adu.org.za>.

Researchers at the DST-NRF Centre of Excellence for Invasion Biology (CIB) at Stellenbosch University are collating the private records of South African scientists, artisans, engineers and mariners who have been involved in the annual resupply and scientific research done in the region. This database, which is expected to be completed by 2013, will contain an estimated 30 000 photographs, documents and other materials and will also be made available on the Internet.

“We have thus far received tremendous support from people who have worked in the region, and who are more than willing to share the photographs and memories of their experiences with us,” says Ms Dora Scott, a researcher at the CIB at Stellenbosch University.

“Although not yet complete, this project has already begun to stimulate and facilitate law, humanities and social science research into SANAP, both nationally and internationally,” she believes.

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Notes to the Editor:

- The Scientific Committee for Antarctic Research (SCAR) has been involved with scientific research into the Antarctic and Sub-Antarctic region since 1958, with an initial focus on matters relating to biology and the environment. South Africa has been a member of SCAR since its inception. In the past decade, SCAR has expanded its research interests to include the Humanities and Social Sciences.
- The South African National Antarctic Programme (SANAP) was initiated in 1959. For its first half-century it focused exclusively on supporting research in biological sciences, earth sciences, oceanography and physical sciences in South Africa's Antarctic and Sub-Antarctic regions (including Marion Island, Gough Island and Antarctica). In 2009, SANAP broadened its focus to include law, humanities and social science. To stimulate and facilitate research in these areas, it created an online archive repository of the history of South Africa's presence in the Southern Ocean and Antarctica as part of the Antarctic Legacy Project.

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