

# Shift in Antarctic decision-making concerns researchers

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New research reveals a concerning shift in Antarctic Treaty decision-making in the face of rising environmental and governance issues in the region.

Doctoral candidate Natasha Gardiner is lead author of a new paper that assesses the performance of Antarctic Treaty decision-making in a changing geopolitical and environmental climate.

Gardiner is an early-career [social scientist](#) in the School of Earth and Environment at Te Whare Wānanga o Waitaha | University of Canterbury (UC). A chapter of her Ph.D. thesis, titled "[Measuring the performance of Antarctic Treaty Decision-making](#)," published in the journal *Conservation Biology*, identifies a growing mismatch between the urgent environmental issues facing Antarctica and the nature of decision-making under the Antarctic Treaty.

Historically, the Antarctic Treaty has been viewed as an exemplar of international cooperation and diplomacy, with effective governance mechanisms underpinning core goals of peace, [environmental protection](#), and the advancement of science.

However, Gardiner and her co-authors, Dr. Neil Gilbert and Associate Professor Daniela Liggett from UC's Gateway Antarctica and Professor Michael Bode from QUT, warn that this admirable record is no guarantee of future success.

Key among their concerns is a shift away from the legally binding agreements that characterized earlier decades of Antarctic decision-making. Instead, the researchers highlight a recent preference for soft laws—voluntary agreements that can reduce accountability and undermine the capacity for agreements to be monitored and enforced.

"In the decades following the signing of the Antarctic Treaty in 1959, the Parties were proactive in adopting legally binding agreements in response to emerging problems," says Gardiner.

"Now, the system appears to be softening in its legal approach, and this

is particularly concerning at a time when Antarctica is experiencing multiple environmental pressures from human activities both within and outside the region."

In seeking to understand the causes of this trend, Gardiner and her collaborators note the rise in Parties to the Treaty. Where only 12 countries—including New Zealand—were initial signatories, there are now 29 Parties tasked with Antarctic decision-making.

Under these conditions, the potential for diplomatic stalemates to arise has increased.

"With more Parties at the decision-making table there are more interests at play and in a consensus-based decision-making model where a single Party has the power to veto, reaching agreement has become more challenging across a number of important conservation issues," she says.

Global geopolitical tensions can play out in the Antarctic governance context and these political dynamics have recently seen ambitious superpowers like China wield the power of veto to block initiatives supported by a majority of Treaty Parties, according to the researchers. An example is when China withheld its support to have the Emperor penguin designated as an Antarctic specially protected species.

In other areas, there is cautious cause for optimism, according to the paper. The Treaty Parties have agreed that a growing tourism industry—which saw visitors to the ice top 100,000 for the first time in 2023—will require legally binding regulations in order to limit further stress on Antarctic ecosystems and prevent irreversible damage.

Underpinning efforts towards consensus decision-making is the need for scientific evidence. In fact, science has been called "the currency of Antarctica," as countries wishing to gain decision-making rights under

the Treaty are required to demonstrate that they are undertaking substantial science on the ice.

"What is really important is that Antarctic science is being used to inform Antarctic decision-making," Gardiner says.

"However, our research shows that while the science community is calling for more responsive environmental policy action, [decision-makers](#) are showing a preference for soft laws to address Antarctic environmental issues. And we see this as misaligned with their obligations—and symptomatic of an overall decline in decision-making performance."

According to Gardiner, options to improve decision-making have been suggested in the past and could be revisited in the future.

"It's so important to investigate ways to invigorate Antarctic Treaty [decision-making](#) because a failure to safeguard Antarctic ecosystems will have consequences for societies across the globe. What happens in Antarctica affects us all."

**More information:** Natasha Blaize Gardiner et al, Measuring the performance of Antarctic Treaty decision-making, *Conservation Biology* (2024). [DOI: 10.1111/cobi.14349](https://doi.org/10.1111/cobi.14349)

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