

Robots may take over polar exploration

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The day may soon come when robots assume much of the responsibility for Antarctic exploration, U.S. scientists reported at a conference in Vienna.

The robots, with ranges of hundreds of miles, could be designed to perform scientific experiments on their own. U.S. engineers have already built a solar-powered prototype and tested it in Greenland, where it has "exceeded expectations," the BBC reported.

Plans call for building and deploying five robots by the end of 2007. James Lever, an engineer with the U.S. Army Cold Regions Research and Engineering Laboratory in Hanover, N.H., told the BBC at the European Geosciences Union annual meeting the robots could perform scientific experiments where access for humans is difficult or expensive.

"There are two basic types of mission scenarios," said Lever. "One would be to stop the robot en route and take the data you need -- things like sampling for bacteria in the snow, measuring the atmosphere, or doing a glaciological survey with ground-penetrating radar.

"Then the other side is array-based sensor networks where you would deploy the instruments and then pick them up some time later."

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