



SA’s remote Marion Island research station in the southern Indian Ocean has been bedevilled by team and logistical problems, including sexual harassment, the brandishing of axes and knives, and food shortages. Pictures: Supplied

# Base instincts: Marion Island ‘feels unsafe’

## Shortages, harrowing team dynamics beset isolated station

By **BOBBY JORDAN**

● Scientists and technicians say they no longer feel safe at SA’s remote Marion Island research station in the southern Indian Ocean.

Crumbling infrastructure, food shortages, theft, sexual harassment and a lack of psychological screening are on a list of concerns submitted earlier this year to the department of environmental affairs (DEA), which this week confirmed plans to improve management of the South African National Antarctic Programme (Sanap).

The nine-page memo and two follow-up meetings were prompted by several incidents over the past few years, notably a team member running amok with an axe during the most recent disastrous mission to Marion Island, which also suffered food shortages

and equipment failure. At one stage the base was running on a small back-up generator.

Several expedition members this week told the Sunday Times about harrowing team dynamics on Marion and SA’s two other research stations, on Gough Island and the flagship base on the Antarctic mainland. The department confirmed several incidents but denied any management crisis.

“DEA acknowledges that some of these incidents could not be anticipated and the approach of introducing psychometric assessments could solve these by early detection of potential people who cannot withstand isolation for a long time,” it said.

A “joint platform” had been established with the department of science & technology (DST) and the National Research Foundation to address scientists’ concerns.

The DEA confirmed several troubling incidents reported to the Sunday Times related to “meltdowns”. Late last year a team member attacked a colleague with a frying pan in the kitchen of the Marion base, then trashed his room with an axe. The department refused to remove the aggressor, who returned home with his teammates in May.

During earlier expeditions a team mem-



Scientists and technicians at the base, which provides crucial weather data.



ber was removed from Gough after brandishing a knife, and an aggressive team member had to be airlifted from the South African base on Antarctica. The DEA said the incidents were under normal disciplinary procedures but conceded that changes to the expedition selection process could help prevent a repetition.

The department also confirmed a formal charge of sexual harassment against a team member’s supervisor. “The investigation was undertaken and the finding could not confirm her allegation. She was offered counselling.”

Sanap expeditions are made up of scientists who conduct research or provide critical weather data, and technicians tasked with maintaining equipment – including generators that power, heat and ventilate the bases.

While the department of public works is

responsible for maintaining the infrastructure, the DEA manages the day-to-day running – an increasingly difficult task due to a shortage of tools and other vital resources.

This week, several stakeholders detailed a series of embarrassing equipment failures during the last Marion expedition:

- The Marion team needed an emergency food delivery from a passing vessel after discovering they did not have enough food in their store, apparently because stocks were stolen out of the DEA’s Cape Town warehouse;
- The main satellite communication system failed; and
- The entire base was relying on a small back-up generator, leaving it without power for periods.

The DEA confirmed that three generators failed between December and March. “The team relied on an emergency generator for four weeks until the arrival of the SA Agulhas II for the takeover voyage, when generators were repaired.”

Sanap’s former chief engineer, Gideon van Zyl, confirmed that he resigned in 2015 partly due to fears about safety.

In a letter to DEA director-general Nosipho Ngcaba, seen by the Sunday Times, Van Zyl claims key Sanap managers were “destroying the programme and putting the lives of expeditioners under risk in the way that they are operating”.

A prominent scientist who made numerous Sanap trips said he had left the programme due to concerns about team selection: “I couldn’t have it on my conscience any more – we were sending people to the end of earth but the infrastructure was so poor that we were risking their lives.”

Veronica Mohapeloa, deputy director of media liaison at the DST, said: “Remediation measures, including recommendations for better training and a chef, have been put in place.”