



public works

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Public Works
REPUBLIC OF SOUTH AFRICA

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MEDIA STATEMENT

MARION ISLAND: NEW RESEARCH CENTRE - NATIONAL ANTARCTICA MONTH

The Department of Public Works is in the process of constructing a new research centre on the Marion Island to the value of R198 million. The construction of the centre commenced in August 2003 and since then has been proceeding to date. Currently the project is estimated to be 45% completed. The new base on Marion Island is near completion and is expected to be completed in 2008.

As part of celebrating the launching of National Antarctica Month, the DPW's unique design of the research centre will allow for spectacular views of the island from all corners of the base and it will certainly cater for world class science. The futuristic structure that is made of steel and fibre glass panelling, with its advance installation systems will provide a homelike comfort to all personnel visiting the research centre.

Previously the Department of Environmental Affairs and Tourism (DEAT) approached the National Department of Public Works (DPW) to replace the existing research base on Marion Island, the larger island of the Prince Edward group islands. This was done with the aim to prioritise climate change which has becoming one of the foremost challenges facing the global world, the necessity to gather more information and conduct more research on mitigating measures to respond to this phenomenon, has become a worldwide priority.

The Antarctica continent with the surrounding Southern Ocean provide natural laboratories in which to study climate change and the likely impacts that this change will have on the earth and the life it supports. This statement highlights one of the important roles of the South African presence on the icy continent.

South Africa, as the only Africa signatory of the Antarctic Treaty, maintains a permanent presence in Antarctica. South Africa's presence places it in a unique position to participate in the decision-making processes that affect the future of the continent.

Marion Island is a special nature reserve; therefore operations are governed by the regulation as described by the environmental impact assessment. The regulations prevent the infestation of alien plant seeds and foreign insect life. Therefore all materials taken to the island are strictly subjected to the various processes of fumigation. South Africa's base in the Antarctica, the SANAE IV, which can accommodate up to 80 people, was the first base in Antarctica to undergo a

comprehensive environmental assessment which was conducted in accordance with strict international guidelines, which were adopted as benchmark for construction of new bases in Antarctica.

Due to extreme weather conditions, scientific research, which often involves the use of delicate and highly sophisticated equipment, requires intricate logistical support and infrastructure.

South Africa supports a diverse scientific programme in Antarctica as well as on the sub-Antarctic Islands. Because weather conditions on the Antarctica and the surrounding Southern Ocean have an influence on the weather of South Africa, an understanding of the influence of Antarctica weather phenomena on South Africa weather is crucial for management and predictive purposes. To this extent South African scientists undertake important meteorological observations in the Southern Ocean, at Antarctica and on the sub Antarctic islands.

Marion Island lies approximately 2 180 km South East of Cape Town (46°49'S and 37°35'E). The climatic conditions are very harsh and precipitation is approximately 2 100mm per year. The average temperature is $\pm 7^{\circ}\text{C}$ and regular wind speeds up to 120km per hour, for that reason it makes construction activities extremely difficult. Although the personnel is very well equipped with protective clothing and safety equipment, the cold and wet conditions still get to you.

Because of the remoteness of the island and the unavailability of the ship, transporting the construction materials to the island is very complex. The duration of the voyage to the island, by ship, is usually five days, if the weather permits it, but as the ship sails through the roughest seas in the world, the duration can become longer. For this reason the construction period has been divided into two construction phases per year.

The first phase commences in February until May and the second phase in August until November. During the first construction phase a team consisting of twenty personnel is recruited to work on site and during the second phase a team of forty personnel are recruited to carry on with the work. Combined manpower utilized on this project has been selectively recruited from the departmental workshops, located throughout South Africa and technical members from the Department of Defence.

After the construction personnel has disembarked from the ship and all the construction materials has been discharged, the ship leaves the island for a period of three months there after it takes a special person to adapt to the construction environment, as some of the members have never been placed in such a situation

Since Marion Island is so isolated, it makes communication with family members difficult and this is due to the fact that the existing satellite system only caters for one voice, fax and internet line. The communication system is primarily used for official duties; where after the dedication to private use of the phone is limited to certain hours in which the construction personnel receive their breaks.

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