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Finding True South: Using symbols to navigate toward a better future for Antarctica

By Evan Townsend

When Roald Amundsen and Sir Robert Falcon Scott's parties set off south on their polar journeys, they didn't follow their magnetic compasses. If they had, they would have traveled *magnetic* south to a point some 2,000 km away from their goal. Instead, the explorers used instruments like sextants, artificial horizons, and theodolites to travel *true* south and reach their ultimate goal—the South Geographic Pole.

Those fateful expeditions helped fill in many of the blank spots on maps of Antarctica, but not all of them. Over the decades that followed, scientists and explorers continued using new tools to get increasingly detailed maps of the continent, from radar to GPS to satellite imagery. Recently, thanks to the help of a supercomputer and hundreds of terabytes of data, Antarctica became the most well-mapped continent on the planet. Despite all this progress, Antarctica faces greater unknowns than ever before. The most pressing questions hanging over the continent today are less about where things are and more about the very nature of the continent's future. How can we protect Antarctica in the face of an impending climate crisis? What do we prioritize? And who decides? Answering questions like these means navigating entirely different obstacles than the ones early explorers faced, and the tools we will need to do it will not come from technological change alone. They must also come from human change.

The direction the polar parties traveled more than 100 years ago has a northern equivalent. Unlike true south, though, it has a second definition. In several languages, "true north" refers to a person's guiding principles, the constant values and goals by which they can orient themselves and their decisions even in the most trying times. For those of us working to protect Antarctica, it's this figurative direction which can lead us toward common ground. By finding our true south, we can also find community, collaboration, and a better future for the continent.

Navigating a Landscape

While stationed at McMurdo early in the winter season of 2018, I was in a picture that went viral. When my colleagues and I took the photo, we didn't anticipate it would be published in outlets around the world. Even more surprising were the personal messages I began receiving from people who felt a strong emotional resonance with the photo. But it wasn't any of us in the picture that were eliciting this response, it was the large rainbow flag we were holding. Even at the end of the earth, this symbol ignited a feeling of connection that spanned the globe.



Members of the winter-over team hold the pride flag at McMurdo Station in May, 2017. The author is fourth from the right.

As the winter darkness set in, I couldn't stop thinking about how powerful that experience was and what those of us working to protect Antarctica could learn from it. Flags, I realized, can shape our identities and perspectives. They can bring issues out of obscurity and into the public eye. In short, flags help us navigate a social and political world.

We Antarcticans speak many languages, live in many countries, and work in many fields, so a flag could help us see around these differences and identify our shared values. As well as helping us find one another, an effective symbol for Antarctica could help other people find us. Without a permanent population, Antarctica doesn't have the kinds of cultural exports or diplomatic tools other places benefit from. In their absence, a flag could be especially powerful for bringing attention to the continent and inviting more people to care about it. Despite all the benefits it could bring, though, there was no such symbol. Never, either on the continent or off, had I seen someone flying a flag to signal their connection to Antarctica.



A sketch of the True South design sits on top of a prototype of the flag.

Creating a Symbol

It was with these thoughts in mind that I sat down in McMurdo's craft room that very same winter. Drawing on my surrounding landscape, I chose navy and white as two colors that reflected the continent but also provided strong contrast for visibility. Keeping in mind the

international nature of Antarctica, I kept the color and design distinct from any existing national flag. I also wanted to incorporate meaningful symbolism while keeping the flag simple enough to have broad appeal.

The final design is composed of two stripes which represent the long nights and long days on the continent. In the top-center of the flag is a white peak representing mountains and icebergs, and below is an arrow pointing south. Together the two shapes form a diamond, which represents the hope that Antarctica will continue to be a place of peace and discovery for generations to come. Inspired by the literal direction the heroic explorers traveled and the figurative direction I hoped it would help the Antarctic community find, I named the flag True South.



Members of the British Antarctic Survey hold True South on South Georgia Island.

Discovering a Community

After it first became public in July of 2020, individuals and organizations quickly adopted the flag and began promoting it in their own networks. Thanks to their support, it quickly proliferated across the world. In the last year, members of nearly every Antarctic program have participated in some capacity, and half a dozen national programs have formally adopted the flag. It's been raised at research stations and historic sites around Antarctica, and it's being flown by expedition companies as a courtesy flag while in the Southern Ocean.



Members of Ecuador and Colombia's National Antarctic Programs flew True South and their national flags at Maldonado Base, Antarctica.

True South has captured attention outside of Antarctica as well. It's flown on every other continent, and has appeared in major news publications in dozens of countries. From remote Pacific Islands to the steppes of Central Asia and hundreds of places between, people are raising the flag to signal their solidarity with the Great White Continent. True South is still in its earliest

stages and adoption is not yet universal, but those of us who support the flag are optimistic its message of cooperation and conservation will continue to resonate across the globe.

Flags get their power from the people that fly them, and True South is no exception. When a person raises it, they add their own experiences and perceptions of Antarctica to its collective meaning. As the community behind it grows, the flag becomes a more effective tool for finding our true south. It's my pleasure to invite you to join us in flying the flag, but even if you don't I hope you will still be able to use it as a wayfinding tool. It's my hope that, wherever you see True South, you will know you have discovered another member of a global community committed to preserving and enriching Antarctica.



True South flies along with the flags of the original 12 Antarctic Treaty Signatories at the ceremonial South Pole.