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PRIME MINISTER

FOR MEDIA

22 MAY 1989

JOINT STATEMENT WITH THE MINISTER FOR
FOREIGN AFFAIRS & TRADE, SENATOR THE HON GARETH EVANS QC
AND THE MINISTER FOR ARTS, SPORT, THE ENVIRONMENT,
TOURISM & TERRITORIES, SENATOR THE HON GRAHAM RICHARDSON

PROTECTION OF THE ANTARCTIC ENVIRONMENT

The Australian Government is dedicated to the comprehensive protection of the Antarctic environment and in that context our strong commitment is that no mining at all - including oil drilling - should take place in and around the continent.

The Government will work in international forums and in bilateral discussions to try to achieve a consensus on that position.

Although we recognise that the recently concluded Convention on the Regulation of Antarctic Mineral Resource Activities (CRAMRA) is very much better than no protective regime of any kind in relation to these activities, we believe that it is both desirable and possible to seek stronger protection for what remains the world's last great wilderness.

Accordingly, we have decided that Australia will not sign the Minerals Convention, but instead will pursue the urgent negotiation of a comprehensive environmental protection convention within the framework of the Antarctic Treaty system.

In that context, Australia will specifically explore the prospects for the establishment of an "Antarctic Wilderness Park". We recognise that achievement of sufficient international agreement, including the necessary consensus among Antarctic Treaty Consultative Parties, to such a significant change of approach in the management of Antarctica, is unlikely to be easy - but Australia will very actively pursue the concept with other countries.

Ministers will take every opportunity, including during the visits of Mr Hawke to Europe and the United States, Senator Evans to India and Europe, and Senator Richardson to Asia and Europe, in the coming months, to encourage international support for a comprehensive environmental regime for Antarctica. Mr Hawke's meeting with French Prime Minister Rocard in June will, in particular, allow full exploration of the common ground between Australia and France on the need to ensure complete protection of the Antarctic environment.

Pending the successful negotiation of a comprehensive environmental protection regime, Australia will make major efforts to strengthen and prolong the present moratorium on mining in Antarctica. The moratorium, which at present applies until the "timely entry into force" of the Minerals Convention, should be given a stronger basis to take account of growing international concern about the potential damage which could be caused by mineral activities in Antarctica.

Australia will be working towards the development of a comprehensive environmental protection convention at the next Antarctic Treaty Consultative Meeting (ATCM) to be held in Paris in October, but that meeting will be only the first in what could prove a protracted process of consideration and negotiation.

The recent preparatory meeting of the ATCM in Paris (9-12 May) had agreed to include on the agenda for the October meeting an item enabling the consideration of overall measures for the protection of the Antarctic environment. Australia's proposal for consideration of a comprehensive environmental protection regime under that item had been welcomed by some, but resisted by others who remain committed to the early entry into force of the Minerals Convention.

While the task will not be an easy one, and the extent of support is not easy to assess at this stage, Australia will vigorously pursue its efforts to persuade other Antarctic Treaty Consultative Parties of the merits of a comprehensive approach to the protection of the Antarctic environment, and one that will in practice ensure that no mining takes place.