



A special conference on the future of Antarctica looks likely to place a ban on mining and oil drilling in the region. Britain, which had supported limited exploitation of Antarctica's resources, is now expected to change its position at next week's meeting in Chile. It could mean Antarctica being designated a world park reserved for scientific research.

Julian Rush, reporting

In the frozen rocks that lie beneath the kilometre-deep Antarctic ice, may be oil, platinum, uranium and other minerals that are running out in an overpopulated world. Only the prohibitive costs and a voluntary ban have prevented mining so far. Two years ago, Britain backed a draft convention that would allow mining. It had some environmental safeguards to protect the unique birds and animals of Antarctica, but under pressure from environmentalists, Australia and France refused to endorse it.

They say Antarctica should become a world park, an unspoilt place where only nature destroys the rare million-year-old blue icebergs. Now Britain's hard line has softened. The government says it won't oppose plans for a world park, even if those include a ban on mining and oil drilling. On the other hand, say environmentalists, Britain's not backing the proposal, either :

Jagdish Patel, GREENPEACE

- The sitting on the fence on the consensus at this meeting has to be brought round and it has to be Britain that takes the lead on this because we are very influential on the Antarctic treaty.

Man is already exploiting and damaging Antarctica. Russian ships trawl here for small prawns called "krill", even now upsetting the fragile ecology. But the price of mining and drilling could be higher ; the loss, for ever, of the harsh, icy beauty of the last great wilderness on Earth.