

FROM MYTH TO REALITY: SEEING ANTARCTICA THROUGH SIGNS AND REPRESENTATIONS

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Since Antarctica was discovered, myth and reality are mixed in peoples minds. To evaluate the state of knowledge about the Antarctic, a test was applied to a random sample of people in two gateways to Antarctica: the Brazilian city of Rio Grande and the Chilean city of Punta Arenas. This would allow to compare the knowledge of citizens from a country with a long tradition of Antarctic scientific and economical activities and with a political territorial posture, with that of people from a country that only recently entered Antarctic research activities, and that has no territorial wishes. The first question asked was about words that are related to the southern Polar region: penguin was the most common answer, but also research stations, krill, whales, seals and mosses. In both countries igloo and polar bear were mentioned, showing the influence of the cartoon Chilly Willy. The meaning of Antarctica was enquired. In Brazil, most of the people did not know, some gave the correct answer but many referred to a beer trade mark. In Chile all explanations were correct. About the importance of that region for the world in Brazil the reference of climatic balance was mostly mentioned, or the curiosity about a new frontier. In Chile a wide range of answers showed from territorial importance to ecological patrimony, privileged clean zone, and water reservoir for the world, biological reserve, scientific interest, and potential use of its resources. The geographic and historic projections in Brazil are deficient and in school material often Antarctica does even exist, or the information and maps show a situation prior to the Antarctic Treaty, while in Chile the Antarctic Peninsula region is considered as part of the Chilean territory. A collection of non identified figures was shown and often misinterpreted in Brazil, but well identified in Chile, with the exception of a polar bear seen as an Antarctic bear. The mental map of Antarctica represented through drawings showed preoccupation with the internationality of the region, global warming, peace, fauna, and cleanness. The results have shown that the Antarctic myth is strongly present even nowadays and outreach and education could improve the knowledge about this important region.