Governing Antarctica

Antarctica is a continent that until recently had no inhabitants. You might conclude that there have never been any inhabitants there because of Antarctica’s extremely cold climate yet the Inuit people have adapted to and lived for centuries in the cold of the Arctic region. Historians tell us that the Inuit and other native people of the Arctic traveled across a land bridge from Asia to inhabit North America tens of thousands of years ago.

Millions of years ago, long before humans existed, Antarctica was once connected to the continents of Africa, Australia, and Asia in a giant continent called Gondwanaland. After the continents reached their present form and humans began inhabiting the lands, no one ventured to Antarctica to live there. There have never been any native people on living in Antarctica to form a government there. Without a government or country, there is no seat of government, a capital, on Antarctica.

Instead Antarctica is ruled by the Antarctic Treaty System, a set of treaties signed by forty-seven countries that declares that no country can claim portions of Antarctica or establish any type of military base there. Antarctica is a giant world preserve to be used for peaceful purposes, especially scientific investigation. Work on the first treaty began in 1959 and the treaty was originally signed in 1961 by twelve countries that had already been conducting research on the continent.

Since 2004 the Antarctic Treaty Secretariat administers the business of the Antarctic Treaty system. This office is located in Buenos Aires, Argentina and is in charge of the annual meeting called Antarctic Treaty Consultative Meetings (ATCM). Delegates from countries that participate in the Antarctic treaties attend the meetings and make decisions about how Antarctica is managed. Although all countries that have signed the treaties can send delegates, only 28 are allowed to vote on issues brought up at the ATCM. The voting delegates come from the original twelve countries that established the treaties and sixteen countries that are actively conducting research in Antarctica.