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The polar regions are extraordinary, magical places. They are cold, windy, inaccessible, ice-clad for most of the year, and yet still teeming with life. What is it about them that attracts so many enthusiasts and scientists willing to spend long months there? A thirst for adventure? Or the opportunity to discover the secrets of nature, practically untouched by humans? Why do Polish scientists so eagerly choose to focus on these regions? And why is it that, although our country is not that close, we Poles do feel so much a part of the polar family? In short, what is it that draws us “Poles to the poles”?

It was in 1957 that the Polish Polar Station was established near Polar Bear Bay at Hornsund Fjord on Spitsbergen, the largest island of the Svalbard Archipelago, by an expedition led by Stanisław Siedlecki. To this day it continues to serve both Polish and international polar researchers, managed by the PAS Institute of Geophysics. Twenty years later, in 1977, another Polish station was established on the other side of the globe, at Admiralty Bay on King George Island in the South Shetland Archipelago, now managed by the PAS Institute of Biochemistry and Biophysics.

Recently, the PAS Institute of Geophysics made the decision to reactivate the Dobrowolski Station at the Bunger Oasis in Eastern Antarctica, which was turned over to Poland in 1959 but has been in a state of complete hibernation for years now. If to this we add all the work done at sea aboard the research vessel “Oceania” maintained by the PAS Institute of Oceanology, it is undeniable that the Polish Academy of Sciences has become a truly global player in the field of polar research. One also cannot forget about the stations maintained by various Polish academic centers: the University of Wrocław, Nicolaus Copernicus University, Maria Curie-Skłodowska University, and Adam Mickiewicz University – all of which have research facilities situated in various regions of Spitsbergen.

This rich infrastructure and the enthusiasm of numerous extraordinary people have contributed to the advancement of many scientific fields in Poland. Our polar explorers are renowned throughout the world and are the pioneers behind many of the discoveries you will read about in this issue. All this is fostered by collaboration among scientists from more than twenty different academic centers and research institutes in Poland. Thanks to this enormous potential, Polish scholars are involved in many international programs, often coordinating them. It is at the Polish stations where numerous young scholars from all over the world take their first professional steps in the field, as we offer excellent opportunities for junior scientists. Poland can also boast of a unique interdisciplinary doctoral program, enabling students to study the natural environment of both the Arctic and Antarctic.

Polar regions are a place where phenomena and processes of fundamental importance for our understanding of the whole geosystem can be scrutinized up close. Studying the impact of accelerated climate change in the Arctic and Antarctic on other regions of the Earth and processes taking place in the biotic and abiotic environment in those regions allows us to improve the accuracy of the climate scenarios for the whole globe, and this in turn is leading to burgeoning interest in the polar regions. This issue of *Academia* magazine offers a closer look at many of the strands of this research, as well as at some of the people who have enthusiastically devoted their lives to studying these cold and far-off lands.



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