

Antarctic sanctuary moves closer with China support: officials

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Environmentalists say the Southern Ocean is home to more than 10,000 unique species, including penguins, whales, seals and colossal squid

Creation of a vast marine sanctuary in Antarctica's "Last Ocean" inched closer at international talks Friday as China for the first time backed the proposal, officials said, with Russia understood to be the last holdout.

Campaigners had hoped the Commission for the Conservation of

Antarctic Marine Living Resources (CCAMLR) would approve two huge sanctuaries at its annual meeting in Australia, including one in the Ross Sea.

The Ross Sea is known as the "Last Ocean" because it is considered the last intact marine ecosystem on Earth, mostly untouched by pollution, overfishing and invasive species.

"Up until now China has not been in favour of establishing this Marine Protected Area and through negotiation and discussion with them they have agreed to support the Ross Sea Marine Protected Area," head of the US delegation Evan Bloom told AFP.

"And that's important because now only one country remains that isn't supportive and so we're closer. This is an important country to have gotten on board. So, for us, this is a pretty good result."

Both the Ross Sea proposal and an Australia-backed East Antarctic protected zone have been blocked four times so far at the annual CCAMLR meets, which require consensus from all 24 member countries and the European Union to progress.

"Of course our preference would be to establish it this year but we have a bit more work to do and we will set about doing it," Bloom said of the Ross Sea protected zone.

New Zealand's Foreign Minister Murray McCully welcomed China's support as a "major step", saying the proposal was designed to balance scientific, environmental and fishing interests.

The US and New Zealand-backed Ross Sea proposal was this year enlarged to cover more than 1.5 million square kilometres (600,000 square miles) but with the overall no fishing zone slightly diminished,

though still covering about 1.1 million square kilometres.

"We also welcome Russia's statement that it is open to working with members on the MPA ahead of the next CCAMLR meeting in 2016," McCully said in a statement.

CCAMLR—a treaty tasked with overseeing conservation and sustainable exploitation of the Antarctic Ocean, also known as the Southern Ocean—is due to wrap up its two-week meeting late Friday, with a decision expected on the fate of the two proposed MPAs.

Both have been on the table since 2011 and have undergone changes as members have debated their merits.

The current proposal for the Australia, France and EU-backed East Antarctica sanctuary is for a 1.0 million square kilometre zone over four areas with some fishing and research allowed as long as conservation values are met.

Environmentalists say the Southern Ocean is home to more than 10,000 unique species, including penguins, whales, seals and colossal squid, as well as being a region critical for scientific research.

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