

Hopes dashed for giant new Antarctic marine sanctuary

28 October 2017, by Martin Parry



An Australia and France-led push this year to create a second protected area in East Antarctica spanning another one million square kilometre zone failed

Hopes for a vast new marine sanctuary in pristine East Antarctica were dashed Saturday after a key conservation summit failed to reach agreement, with advocates urging "greater vision and ambition".

Expectations were high ahead of the annual meeting of the Commission for the Conservation of Antarctic Marine Living Resources (CCAMLR)—a treaty tasked with overseeing protection and sustainable exploitation of the Southern Ocean.

Last year's summit in Hobart saw the establishment of a massive US and New Zealand-backed [marine protected area](#) (MPA) around the Ross Sea covering an area roughly the size of Britain, Germany and France combined.

But an Australia and France-led push this year to create a second protected area in East Antarctica spanning another one million square kilometre zone failed.

Officials told AFP that Russia and China were key stumbling blocks, worried about compliance issues and fishing rights. Consensus is needed from all 24 CCAMLR member countries and the European Union.

Greenpeace called for "greater vision and ambition" in the coming year while WWF's Antarctic program chief Chris Johnson said it was another missed opportunity.

"We let differences get in the way of responding to the needs of fragile wildlife," he said.

Australia's chief delegate Gillian Slocum described the failure as "sad".

She also bemoaned little progress on addressing the impacts of [climate change](#) which was having a "tangible effect" on the frozen continent.

"While CCAMLR was not able to adopt a Climate Change Response Work Program this year, members will continue to work together ahead of the next meeting to better incorporate climate change impacts into the commission's decision-making process," she said.

Vital to move forward

Plans were set out in 2009 to establish a series of MPAs in the Southern Ocean allowing marine life to migrate between areas for breeding and foraging, but it has been slow going.

Antarctica is home to penguins, seals, toothfish, whales and huge numbers of krill, a staple food for many species.

They are considered critical for scientists to study how marine ecosystems function and to understand the impacts of climate change on the ocean.

Andrea Kavanagh, head of The Pew Charitable

Trusts' Antarctic and Southern Ocean work, said after last year's historic Ross Sea designation it was "disappointing that CCAMLR could not agree to protect more of the vast and biologically diverse Southern Ocean".

She said it was vital to "continue moving forward in the coming years by agreeing to further protections ... or risk jeopardizing the health of the region's intact ecosystems".

A third German-backed plan is in the works to protect the Weddell Sea, which extends from the southeast of South America over some 2.8 million square kilometres.

But it has been sent back for amendments.

A proposal for a fourth zone of 94,000 square kilometres around the Western Antarctic Peninsula was presented by Argentina and Chile, conservationists told AFP.

The East Antarctica plan originally comprised seven large marine areas but was reduced to three as a compromise—MacRobertson, Drygalski, and the D'Urville Sea-Mertz region.

The plan was for D'Urville to be a no-catch zone, which WWF said would aid a stricken Adelie penguin colony near the French Antarctic research station there.

Mass starvation wiped out thousands of chicks in the colony this year, with unusually thick sea ice linked to the break up of the Mertz glacier forcing their parents to forage further for food. Only two survived.

While the East Antarctica proposal failed to get over the line, a research and monitoring plan to oversee the implementation of the Ross Sea MPA so scientists can better understand how it affects the ecosystem's health was endorsed.

Protection of the Ross Sea takes effect from December 1.

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