

Antarctic marine park: conservationists frustrated after protection bid fails for eighth time

Commission for the Conservation of Antarctic Marine Living Resources unable to agree on plan backed by Australia, France and EU

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An Adelie penguin near the French station at Dumont d'Urville in East Antarctica. A plan to create a marine park across 1 million square kilometres has failed. Photograph: Reuters

Conservationists have expressed frustration that an international commission for protecting marine life in **Antarctica** has failed for the eighth consecutive time to create a marine park across 1 million sq km on the continent's east.

Members of the Commission for the Conservation of Antarctic Marine Living Resources (CCAMLR) could not agree on the proposal, backed by Australia, France and the EU, that would have protected habitat for penguins, seals, whales and seabirds.

Some questioned the commission's credibility, which has a membership of 25

countries and the European Union and meets annually in Hobart, Tasmania.

The commission has struggled to make decisions on marine parks due to its rules that require all members to agree. Russia and China have previously been blamed for blocking the east Antarctic plan, but the meetings are behind closed doors.

Australia's environment minister, Sussan Ley, had backed the proposal, saying the government was committed to protecting the region.

In a statement to Guardian Australia after the meeting, she said: "[The marine park plan] is something that we see as worthwhile but we also respect the views of the nations at the conference. There was widespread support and these things can take time. We will continue to look at future strategies."

A statement from CCAMLR said the east Antarctica plan, as well as proposals for protected areas in the Weddell Sea and Western Antarctic Peninsula, would be considered again at next year's meeting.

The East Antarctic marine park would have protected about 1 million sq km of ocean in three distinct areas, covering crucial habitats and foraging grounds for penguins, seals, whales and seabirds.

Frida Bengtsson, of Greenpeace, said: "Despite the efforts of many members, CCAMLR appears to be going backwards. It is not acceptable that fisheries in the Southern Ocean move forward every year while progress is stalled on establishing marine protected areas.

"Millions of people want to see the Southern Ocean protected and CCAMLR's inability to do this calls its credibility into question."

Speaking from Hobart, Claire Christian, the executive director of the Antarctic and Southern Ocean Coalition, which represents more than 15 environment groups, said it was not time to give up on CCAMLR.

She said in the lead-up to the meeting Russia and China had expressed concerns on how research and monitoring would take place in the marine park.

She told Guardian Australia: "That's usually something you decide after you designate a marine protected area. The science is clear and we can't back off, even if it is hard to do. We need to buckle down and work harder to find a way

across the deadlock.”

Prof Tim Stephens, an Antarctic treaty expert at the University of Sydney, told Guardian Australia that, like other fisheries organisations, what happens inside the CCAMLR meetings was opaque.

The one previous major success – the declaration of a 1.55 million sq km marine park in the Ross Sea in 2016 – had only happened, he said, after high-level political intervention from the United States from the then US secretary of state, John Kerry.

Stephens said: “I think there needs to be a better strategy – just going in with the science is not enough. There needs to be a serious injection of diplomacy and politics and tactics.”

He said CCAMLR was the only organisation with the ability to declare protected areas in Antarctica and there was no alternative body to work with.

“But if marine protected areas don’t get up, then governments might want to start putting up more conservation measures. CCAMLR has adopted hundreds of conservation measures. Maybe governments might now look carefully at individual species to try and get outcomes through that.”

Andrea Kavanagh, director of the Pew Charitable Trusts, said the failure of the proposal for the eighth consecutive year was “disheartening”.

“Over this time, we have seen multiple breeding failures for Adélie penguin colonies, habitat loss throughout the region, a concentrated krill fishing effort, and the warmest Southern Ocean temperatures ever recorded. Scientists have been clear that [marine parks] are needed to make a warming and acidifying ocean more resilient.

“Unfortunately, government leaders failed to heed the UN’s immediate call to action on climate change and made no contribution toward protecting the Southern Ocean’s critical ecosystem and its vital function as a carbon sink, nor the goal of safeguarding 30% of the world’s oceans by 2030.”

Agreements were made at the meeting to adopt a new plan to monitor krill, a critical food source for many Antarctic species, while a major krill fishing industry group agreed to extend self-imposed restriction on fishing in some areas during key nesting and breeding times for penguins.

Also at the meeting, the commission banned fishing vessels from dumping plastics and any oil or fuel products across the vast 35.7 million sq km area covered by its convention – an area covering about 10% of the world's oceans.

Australian Antarctic Division scientist Dr Dirk Welsford was also endorsed as chair of the commission's scientific committee, the most senior elected role in CCAMLR.

Australia and European Union push for east Antarctic marine sanctuary

A proposed sanctuary to protect reefs and marine life off east Antarctica was knocked back last year by nations including China and Russia

Lisa Cox

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Climate change and the threat of industrial fishing are pressuring Antarctic marine life. Photograph: Richard Coleman/AFP/Getty Images

Australia will push for a million square kilometres of the Antarctic ocean to be protected as a marine sanctuary at an international forum in **Hobart** this week.

Bids to preserve a large area of pristine ocean off east Antarctica have struck opposition in the past, including at **last year's** meeting of the Commission for the Conservation of Antarctic Marine Living Resources, where China and Russia played a part in blocking the proposal.

Australia is co-sponsoring the proposal for an East Antarctic Marine Protected Area, along with the European Union, and will resubmit it at this year's CCAMLR meeting. The organisation's membership includes 25 nations and the EU.

The plan requires the support of all members for it to proceed.

The environment minister, **Sussan Ley**, said the decision to pursue the sanctuary "underlines our commitment to protecting the Antarctic and Southern Ocean".

Gillian Slocum, the leader of Australia's delegation to the CCAMLR, said the proposal would protect reefs and safeguard several marine species.

"When established, the East Antarctic MPA will protect distinctive deep-water reefs and feeding areas for marine mammals, penguins and other seabirds," she said.

The Australian Antarctic Division said the proposed sanctuary would also provide scientific reference zones to help researchers understand the effects of fishing outside protected areas and the consequences of climate change for Southern Ocean ecosystems.

The Australian Antarctic explorer and adventurer Tim Jarvis has called on member countries to support the plan, warning that climate change and the threat of industrial fishing were putting pressure "on this incredible place".

"If you don't protect those resources, you risk disrupting the whole global food web in the ocean," he said. "You're not going to head off climate change but you're going to make them more resilient to it.

"If it could all be protected, that would be fantastic but if we could get this million square kilometres it would be a huge step in the right direction."

But he added that most of the changes necessary to protect **Antarctica** and its marine life needed to be through a collective global effort to cut carbon pollution and limit global heating.

“You want to protect Antarctica, we need to change the way we do things back in the rest of the world ... in the cities where 75% of us live, where we consume the energy that contributes to the CO₂ emissions,” he said.

Australian Associated Press contributed to this report