

DAVE WALSH, ADVISOR TO THE ANTARCTIC OCEAN ALLIANCE, HIGHLIGHTS THE NEED FOR MARINE PROTECTED AREAS IN THE ANTARCTIC REGION

# Saving Antarctica's ocean

October 2015 saw 25 governments descend on Hobart, Tasmania, to discuss how to manage and regulate the great Southern Ocean that surrounds Antarctica. The question on everyone's mind was: would members of the Commission for the Conservation of Antarctic Marine Living Resources (CCAMLR) finally reach agreement on protecting two vast areas of the marine environment, in the Ross Sea and off the coast of east Antarctica?

The answer unfortunately, was "no". While creation of the marine protected areas failed to get consensus for a fifth time, delegates headed home with a sense that progress was being made, following China's surprising move of supporting protection of the Ross Sea. CCAMLR desperately needs this kind of impetus and inspired action towards ocean protection; long upheld as a vanguard of marine conservation policy, CCAMLR now trails behind success stories making news elsewhere.

For example, at the Our Oceans conference in Chile in early October, a number of new, very large marine protected areas (MPAs) were announced, representing an additional 2,473,000 square kilometres of highly protected marine areas. These include huge areas around New Zealand's Kermadec Islands, and around Chile's Desventuradas (Unfortunate) and Easter Islands. Following this, in late October, Palau's president established one of the world's largest protected areas of ocean in the Pacific island nation's waters.

At the United Nations Sustainable Development Summit in late September, attending countries had signed a new, ambitious and achievable set of targets to protect our oceans by 2020,<sup>1</sup> including actions to conserve at least 10% of coastal and marine areas, consistent with national and international law and based on the best available scientific information; and sustainably manage and protect marine and coastal ecosystems to avoid significant adverse impacts, including by



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strengthening their resilience, and take action for their restoration in order to achieve healthy and productive oceans.

## Lifeblood

The UN clearly understands that these goals are achievable, and that humanity must strive to reach them by the set deadlines. The oceans are the lifeblood of our planet; covering more than 70% of the Earth's surface, our oceans feed us, providing livelihoods for millions of people in coastal communities, regulate our weather and other systems, and sequester carbon dioxide.

However, we are not treating our oceans with the respect they deserve and need. We are overfishing, causing the rapid depletion of fish populations, and degrading the marine environment and coastal regions through pollution, ocean acidification and climate change. A recent report from the WWF<sup>2</sup> found that in just 45 years we have caused half of the wildlife in our oceans to vanish. Not only are our oceans in danger, we are threatening our own future, too.

## Pristine wilderness

The wild, icy body of water that encircles Antarctica remains one of the Earth's last pristine wildernesses, and one of the least-impacted marine environments. Our organisation, the Antarctic Ocean Alliance, campaigns for the protection of this region, which remains untouched (partly due to its relative isolation from human activity).

The Southern Ocean makes up roughly 10% of our global ocean, and is home to more than 10,000 unique species, including most of the world's penguins, whales, seabirds, colossal squid and the commercially targeted Antarctic toothfish.

## Marine protected areas

Just 1% of the world's oceans are under strict protection within marine protected areas or reserves; and most of the existing conservation measures lie within territorial waters, not international ones.

MPAs work by eliminating extractive activities from large areas of the ocean, ensuring that some areas remain undisturbed. This helps populations of fish, marine mammals and birds find nourishment and shelter, to reproduce and replenish their numbers, and to live without disturbance. In addition, healthy marine ecosystems are more resilient to climate change impacts. While creating marine reserves is only one part of dealing with the challenges faced by our planet, it's a significant one, and an important component of the UN's ocean goals.

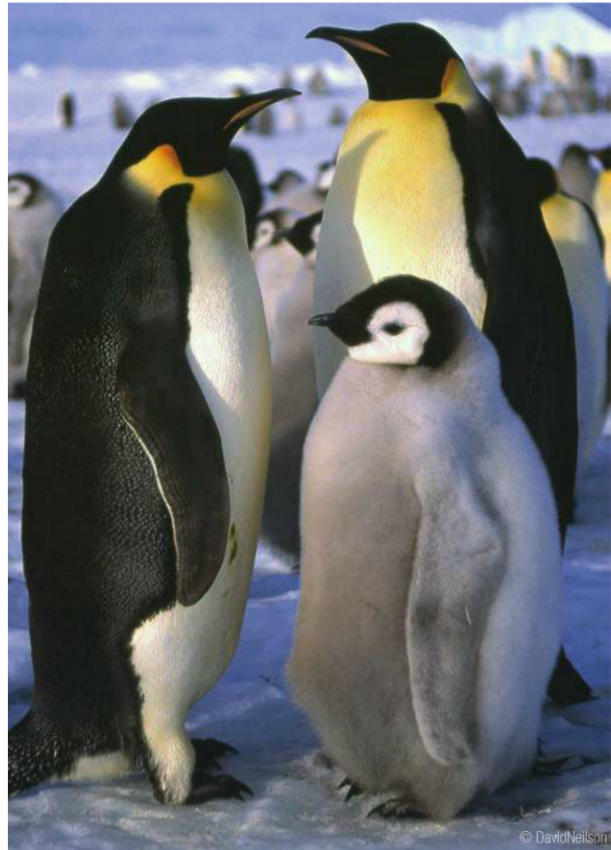
### CCAMLR

The Commission for the Conservation of Antarctic Marine Living Resources was established in 1982, and is made up of 24 countries, plus the European Union. As part of the Antarctic Treaty System, CCAMLR is tasked with the protection and management of the marine living resources of the vast Southern Ocean.

CCAMLR meetings are much like other international fora, where diplomats and NGOs get together to chew over the small print of conservation or geopolitical agreements. Since 2012, however, CCAMLR has been mired in a frustrating impasse, with members bickering over the fine details of Southern Ocean protection, fuelled by national anxieties about fishing rights and complications from various geopolitical issues. A special meeting convened in Bremerhaven in 2013, expressly for the purpose of solving the blockage, failed to have any impact.

At the three annual meetings since, proposals were variously blocked by Russia and China. The latter has expressed concerns on how protection would affect its future plans to expand its fisheries. As for Russia, international

**The Southern Ocean is home to most of the world's penguins**



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conflicts appear to be the most obvious factor, as are ongoing concerns it has regarding the duration of marine protection, along with other technical and scientific aspects of the proposed protection.

This year, both Russia and China blocked the east Antarctic proposal, but in an unexpected move, China agreed to a new, larger draft proposal for the Ross Sea, expanding the protected area to 1.5 million km<sup>2</sup>, following discussions with the United States and New Zealand. This provided a glimmer of hope for the many people who have worked long and hard to make Antarctic marine protection a reality.

### Rational use

While disagreements were always expected at this meeting, one thing was beyond debate: the creation of large scale MPAs complements CCAMLR's central objective of conserving Antarctic marine life. In addition, they help to manage the 'rational use' of the Southern Ocean.

As noted in the Convention on the Conservation of Antarctic Marine Living Resources, which forms the basis for the entire organisation, 'rational use' is intended to:<sup>3</sup>

- 1) Prevent any harvested population from decreasing to levels so low that it is unable to maintain itself;
- 2) Maintain and, where necessary, restore the ecological relationships between harvested, dependent and related populations of Antarctic marine living resources; and
- 3) Prevent or minimise the risk of change to the marine ecosystem based on the best available science.

**Thanks to its rich marine life, the Ross Sea remains one of the most intact marine ecosystems on the planet**



© John Weller

### The last ocean

The Ross Sea MPA proposal (1.25 million km<sup>2</sup> before this CCAMLR meeting, now up 1.5m km<sup>2</sup>), put forward by the USA and New Zealand, would protect the oceanic equivalent of Africa's Great Plains. Thanks to its rich marine life, the Ross Sea remains one of the most intact marine ecosystems on the planet; large populations of its top predators are still present, and it is largely untouched by the ills that plague Earth's other oceans.

In addition, the Ross Sea offers unprecedented opportunities for science and for understanding how large scale, fully functioning ecosystems work and are influenced by climate change and ocean acidification.

### East Antarctica

The east Antarctic proposal (947,000km<sup>2</sup>), sponsored jointly by Australia, France, and the European Union, is home to a significant proportion of the Southern Ocean's penguins, seals, and whales. The eastern Antarctic shelf also contains rare and unusual seafloor and oceanographic features. Scientists are still trying to understand the dynamics between its oceanography and the seafloor environment and to define the species that live there. The region's unique features, coupled with its biological value to seabirds, seals, and other animals, make the east Antarctic coastal region a prime area for protection.

The European Union's leadership on this proposal is key; quite simply, it 'wants to see the vulnerable areas around Antarctica better protected in recognition of their global importance',<sup>4</sup> and 'is committed to the protection of the oceans, domestically and internationally and supports the establishment of MPAs in general and in particular in the convention area of CCAMLR in the Southern Ocean'. While France is a co-proponent, the EU's participation in CCAMLR gives both CCAMLR and non-CCAMLR European states a voice in pushing for large scale ocean protection.

### Erosion of ambition

Since they were introduced, both MPA proposals have undergone several compromises, resulting in reductions of the planned protected areas. This October's increase in the Ross Sea proposal shows a potential new direction for CCAMLR, one that must be maintained, if it is to fulfil its mandate, and to return to its position as the flagship organisation working for marine conservation worldwide. The Antarctic Ocean Alliance (AOA) is calling on CCAMLR nations to immediately designate both MPAs, before any further erosion to their size or duration takes place.

AOA believes that CCAMLR countries must overcome the geopolitical hurdles that have stymied past negotiations, and we are calling on CCAMLR's more recalcitrant members to seize the opportunity to put these two crucial marine protected areas in place, now, and for good.

CCAMLR members are no doubt aware of the successful protections afforded to the land of Antarctica. In 1959, at the height of the Cold War, a period of mistrust and rampant paranoia, the world's most powerful nations, the Soviet Union and the United States, put their differences aside to sign the Antarctic Treaty, thereby protecting the frozen continent in the name of peace and science.

Following last year's meeting, Russia took over the chair of CCAMLR and will continue in the role until November 2016. While diplomatic concerns continue to spoil relations elsewhere, the Antarctic Ocean Alliance is urging Russia to seize this chance to make history while at the helm of CCAMLR as it sails towards a new age of ocean protection.

The Antarctic Ocean Alliance, a project of the Antarctic and Southern Ocean Coalition (ASOC), is an international coalition of leading environmental and conservation organisations and philanthropists from around the world including ASOC, Blue Marine Foundation (UK), Deepwave (Germany), ECO (NZ), Forest and Bird (NZ), Greenovation Hub (China), Greenpeace, Humane Society International, International Fund for Animal Welfare (IFAW), International Programme on the State of the Ocean (IPSO), Korean Federation for Environmental Movement (KFEM), The Last Ocean, Mission Blue (US), Oceans 5 (US), The Pew Charitable Trusts, and the Whale and Dolphin Conservation Society (WDCS). Associate partners include Oceana, International Polar Foundation, Natural Resources Defense Council (NRDC) and other groups worldwide.

For more details, and to get involved, visit [www.antarcticocean.org](http://www.antarcticocean.org)

We are also encouraging the EU, France, Australia, New Zealand, the United States and other supporters of the two proposals to remain strong, and to keep their faith in the intrinsic value of protecting the east Antarctic and the Ross Sea.

Along with the need to protect the Southern Ocean for its own sake, Antarctica is critical to scientific research, both for the study of how intact marine ecosystems function and for monitoring the impacts of climate change. Fully protected marine reserves are the single most powerful tool that CCAMLR has for fulfilling its mandate to protect the dazzling spectrum of Antarctica's marine life, and to ensure that the Southern Ocean ecosystem can withstand the impacts of climate change and ocean acidification.

### References

- 1 Goal 14: Conserve and sustainably use the oceans, seas and marine resources:  
<http://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/oceans/>
- 2 Living Blue Planet Report  
[http://assets.wwf.org.uk/custom/stories/living\\_blue\\_planet/?\\_ga=1.19969916.537450017.14422359730](http://assets.wwf.org.uk/custom/stories/living_blue_planet/?_ga=1.19969916.537450017.14422359730)
- 3 Article II of the CCAMLR Convention:  
<https://www.ccamlr.org/en/organisation/camlr-convention-text#II>
- 4 EU to push for establishment of Marine Protected Areas in Antarctica  
[http://ec.europa.eu/information\\_society/newsroom/cf/mare/itemdetail.cfm?item\\_id=11373](http://ec.europa.eu/information_society/newsroom/cf/mare/itemdetail.cfm?item_id=11373)

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