Once again, CCAMLR is meeting to discuss the conservation of marine life in the Southern Ocean. One of the key points of discussion for this year, as for a number of years previously, are marine protected areas or MPAs.

Here ECO provides a few basic points worth remembering about this process in case these have been lost in the haze of discussions of past years:

- Years ago, CCAMLR agreed to complete a representative system of MPAs in the Convention Area;
- CCAMLR’s made progress on the creation of a network of MPAs progressed until 2011, and then stalled until the designation of the Ross Sea Region MPA in 2016;
- The RSMPA was a monumental step forward, but it was "only" one step, or more of a hop, in a broader process.

It is time to complete the task. There are three proposals on the table in various stages of development, which involve directly or indirectly many CCAMLR members (as proponents, contributors of scientific knowledge, and in many other ways). A quick overview:

- Each proposal covers an area that is unique, vulnerable or representative of a planning Domain, or part thereof, sometimes overlapping in part with adjacent domains.
- Then there are the ecosystem-based, precautionary approaches of the Convention that need to be included in the proposal and its eventual implementation. For a refresher, please refer to Art. II (iii) of the Convention.

Finally, some experience from the global process of MPA designation worldwide:

- MPAs should be, or at a minimum should include, no-take areas.
- MPAs should be permanent.
- MPAs should be large (even when there is a lack of data).

If these basic points are met, MPAs will contribute to the objectives of the Convention, which is why we are all in Hobart (not the fairy penguins).

ECO is fully aware that this is a complex issue in a number of ways. It would be complex even if it were only about the technicalities of designing MPAs, let alone the various other factors and interests that are part of the mix.

That is reason not to make the process more difficult than it needs to be. ECO suggests that members use their intellectual and diplomatic resources and skills to move this process forward and not cynically delay, stall or block to justify short-term objectives (e.g. access to fish, fishing, and fishing grounds).

Which leads us to an additional, sometimes overlooked point: MPAs must achieve something in terms of conservation of marine life - something tangible, as well as significant. They have to protect something. We are not all spending our time and resources to agree on paper parks, right?

**WOLF DRESSED AS SHEEP? WHEN RESEARCH LOOKS A LOT LIKE FISHING**

It is sometimes the case that fishing data can be used for scientific purposes. This depends on a number of factors, including whether or not that information can be made available to the scientific community and the general public despite “commercial sensitivity”. At any event,
ancillary uses of fishing do not in themselves justify fishing activities, which are subject to CCAMLR’s Conservation Measures.

The opposite also occurs: what appears to be fisheries research is essentially fishing. ECO is concerned about the spread of research and exploratory fishing in the Southern Ocean, coupled with the failure of some research programs to produce…well, research – including outputs that are available to the science community and the general public. Get the idea? Much fishing is going on, but there is comparatively little research data to show for it. This is particularly the case as currently reporting for research plans under CM 24-01 is not as high as for some categories of fishing. On top of that, research under CM 24-01 is exempt from some Conservation Measures.

This problematic trend is coupled to an expansion of fishing into new areas ahead of considerations to extend spatial protection to those areas. Limited data availability is often used as a justification not to protect some areas, and is an excuse for more data collection exercises i.e. research fishing.

We should be clear that ECO is very supportive of actual scientific research in the Southern Ocean. Scientific research is the cornerstone of good conservation in ecosystem-based management, and an important complement to the precautionary principle. We could even say that fisheries research has a role. But ECO is not in support of fishing masquerading as research.

The solution? Raising the bar on fisheries research programs. Developing procedures for proposal and reporting on data poor fisheries. Increase the transparency of the process. Which would be the equivalent of pulling the sheep’s skin out of the wolf.

ECO’S FAIRY TALE CORNER:
Once upon a time all the animals in a valley were plant-eating vegetarians who lived in harmony. They met once a year to make important decisions about how to allocate the plants of the valley and make sure everyone had enough to eat. One year, during their yearly assembly, the animals couldn’t agree, like they usually did. The owls had decided that they didn’t like the decisions that all the animals had agreed to. There were many discussions that went late at night over many days.

While the animals were talking, a group of lions outside the valley happened to wander by. They noticed that the animals were very busy discussing how to allot their food for the year and weren’t paying attention to anything else. They called all of their friends and agreed on a plan. They crept into the forest surrounding the place where the animals were meeting. Then they pounced and ate all of them.

Afterwards, the lions congratulated themselves on getting such a good meal so easily. Usually, they did not hunt in such a big group. “We always thought the valley animals were foolish to work together. But we were very wrong,” one of the lions said. From then on the lions worked together, and no lion ever went hungry again.