New Zealand will pledge its support this week for three huge, new marine reserves around the coast of Antarctica. Will other nations come to the party? Eloise Gibson previews a big meeting on the fate of the Southern Ocean.

Why are conservationists tweeting photos from Hobart?

Hobart is over-flowing with diplomats, conservation heads and hundreds of marine scientists for the 37th annual meeting of CCAMLR. New Zealand is there supporting other countries to create an enormous network of marine reserves, but not everyone is necessarily on board with
the plan. Our diplomats say our message will be: Why don’t we just do it?

**Sorry. CAMA-what?**

It’s pronounced ‘Camel-arr’ and it’s short for the Commission for the Conservation of Antarctic Marine Living Resources. Since the Southern Ocean is part of the high seas, its fisheries are technically open to anyone willing to brave the sea ice in a fishing boat. The council was created in the 1980s to prevent rampant plunder.

It is CCAMLR that tells fishing vessels how many Antarctic krill they can turn into Omega-3 supplements and how many Antarctic toothfish they can catch to sell as Chilean seabass. It also works with scientists on conservation projects, like finding new ways to prevent seabirds being killed by fishing vessels.

**Is it like the UN?**

Much smaller. Twenty-four countries and the EU work together to manage the creatures of the Southern Ocean, which represents about 15 percent of the world’s total ocean.

And CCAMLR has a conservation mantra. More than a decade ago it committed itself to creating a ring of marine reserves around the continent, but progress has been fitful. The plan is to preserve a representative slice of each of the Southern Ocean’s unique habitats and their creatures, whether they be seals, krill, coral, penguins or toothfish. The process took a huge step forward in 2016, when New Zealand and the United States secured everyone else’s agreement to create a roughly Alaska-sized marine protected area in the Ross Sea.

But that was just the first piece in what’s supposed to be a large network of safe zones. Groups like Greenpeace and the Antarctic and Southern Ocean Coalition want countries to hurry up and protect more areas, preferably at this meeting.

**Why so much fuss about the Southern Ocean?**

You can argue yourself in knots about whether Antarctica is truly pristine anymore – human influence is changing the acidity of its oceans, melting its ice, and changing the food web of its creatures. But the Southern Ocean is very unusual in that it still has an unbroken food chain, from the minuscule plankton at the bottom to top predators such as deep-sea toothfish, orca and Weddell seals. A sizeable chunk of the world’s Adelie and Emperor penguins live and breed there. Underwater there are cold-water corals, ancient sponges and other weird and wonderful creatures that live nowhere else. Te Papa’s embalmed colossal squid lived in the Southern Ocean, during better days.

Fishing and tourism will still be allowed around the continent one the protections are in place, but they might be moved or reduced. For example, when the Ross Sea marine reserve took effect in 2017 it didn’t reduce the total allowable catch of Antarctic toothfish, which remains at about 3000-tonnes a year. But it pushed the commercial fishing industry north, out of an important toothfish spawning ground.
Once marine reserves are in place, scientists hope to study the preserved areas of marine life and compare them to other places around the continent where humans are much more active. Comparing protected and unprotected parts of the sea will give them clues about, for example, whether fishing is affecting an ecosystem or whether it’s something more diffuse, like climate change. Effects like melting ice and changing acidity can’t be kept at bay by marine reserves, but reserves can help scientists single out their effects.

A weddell seal in Antarctic waters. Photo: Bruno Marie

But will it work?

Good question. CCAMLR operates by consensus – making its decisions durable, but also difficult to secure. In practice, Russia and China are usually hardest to get over the line but it is possible. Those two countries raised prolonged questions about the Ross Sea proposal, but agreed to a modified proposal in 2016. Russia and China appear likely to flag some issues about proposals at this meeting, too.

What’s New Zealand doing?

New Zealand supports all the proposals and is telling other countries so, says Amy Laurenson, the head of the New Zealand delegation in Hobart. We might raise a few scientific questions, but we want them to move forward. “We have said in our meetings this week with other members that we support these marine protected areas (MPAs) and we really would like to
see some good outcomes on MPAs from the meeting this year. We are actively saying: ‘We think we are ready to move ahead on the representative network of MPAs in the Southern Ocean, why don’t we just do it?’,” she says.

But while New Zealand helped lead the adoption of the Ross Sea protected area because of our tooth-fishing and scientific research there (NIWA scientists are renowned experts on toothfish), this time we’re playing more of a support role.

“We have a lot of experience in the Ross Sea and a really strong interest in ensuring its ongoing protection,” says Laurenson. “It’s the region where we have expertise. For MPAs proposed in other areas, including areas where we don’t normally operate, we can support other countries with any data we have that’s relevant but essentially what the MPA in those areas looks like is up to the lead proponents and the scientific process. We’ve indicated we support all the proposed MPAs. We are now working closely with the proponents of the new MPAs to ensure the scientific case is really robust before the political stage of the process, where we need to achieve consensus.”

In other words, we’ll help where we can – but these proposals aren’t our babies.

**Whose babies are they?**

To get a new area protected, a CCAMLR member country has to write up a proposal and justify it.

Often countries work in pairs to do this: France and Australia have a joint plan on the table at this meeting, so do Argentina and Chile, and there is one more proposal, from Germany. (The EU is technically a single member of CCAMLR, but really its member countries divvy up tasks between them).

The lead country or pair of countries shepherds the idea through the process. First they present a plan to CCAMLR’s influential scientific committee, which reviews the area that’s proposed to be protected and teases out the environmental threats, special features of the ecosystem and the scientific purpose of preserving it. Then the lead countries must persuade the other heads of delegation (the diplomats).

The scientific agreement stage can take years – it took from 2012 to 2016 for the Ross Sea marine protected area to be explored and questioned by scientists from all nations. Once the science is agreed, in theory there should be less room for political shenanigans. For example, it didn’t take long after the Ross Sea proposal was approved by CCAMLR scientists in 2016 for it to win support from political heads of delegation and take effect in 2017.

But it doesn’t always happen that way. Australia and France’s proposal was introduced before our one and was approved by the scientific committee two years ago. It is still languishing in the political system.

That’s why NGOs (and some countries) say CCAMLR needs to make strong progress at this meeting.
What areas are next in line?

There are three big new protected zones being talked about, totalling 1.2 million square miles:

1. East Antarctica: This one covers three large blocks of ocean and sea floor south of Australia and South Africa, in an area rich in coral and penguins. This proposal has the dubious distinction of having been languishing the longest: it was proposed by Australia and France a year before New Zealand and the US made the Ross Sea proposal and it was approved by the scientific committee two years ago. But it doesn’t seem to be able to get past the heads of delegations, as some countries (Russia and China) feel it’s not yet ready.

2. Weddell Sea: This is the biggest of the new proposed protected zones and the one being pushed most actively by Greenpeace. It’s also a lucrative fishing area for krill (used to make Omega-3 supplements). If created, it would be the largest natural reserve anywhere in the world. This sea shares its name with the area’s Weddell seals (whales and penguins also frequent it) and it’s located on the opposite side of the continent from East Antarctica, in a crook of the Antarctic Peninsula (the sticking-out tail you see on Antarctica maps). Germany is leading this one and is hoping to get the scientific committee to approve the proposal this week. Assuming that happens, Germany hopes to also get final sign-off from policy-makers at this meeting - but it’s unclear whether they’ll reach consensus. Russia and China have already expressed some concerns they want addressed before agreeing. It’s likely diplomats are informally discussing this proposal over meal breaks as you read this. By the week’s end, everyone will have a better idea of its chances of succeeding.

3. Western Antarctic Peninsula/Domain 1: This bit of sea lies on the opposite side of the Antarctic Peninsula from the Weddell sea, near Argentina and Chile, and it’s those two nations who are leading the call for it to be protected. All areas proposed to be protected by CCAMLR are divided into numbered “domains” but most of them are known by much catchier names, like the Weddell Sea. Unfortunately for poor old Domain 1, it’s numbered name has stuck, though it’s also called the Western Antarctic Peninsula. Unlike the very sparsely-trafficked Ross Sea, the Antarctic Peninsula is frequented by tourists, meaning countries will need to work out how to manage tourist access if they protect the area for marine life. This brand new proposal by Argentina and Chile is due to be introduced for the first time to the scientific committee this week. Its chances of protection got a major boost this year when five major krill fishing companies, making up 85 percent of Antarctic krill industry, agreed to halt fishing in sensitive areas near penguin breeding grounds. The companies also publicly backed the creation of marine protected areas. Those of us not in Hobart may not find out how that went until after the meeting ends on November 2.

Which is the most important?

It depends who you ask. Pew Charitable Trusts has been drawing attention to the East Antartica proposal, because it seems to be seriously stalled despite having been thoroughly canvassed by everyone. The Antarctic and Southern Ocean Coalition (ASOC) says all areas are important, but notes it’s frustrating that East Antarctica has been languishing in the system
for so long. Greenpeace managed to get two million people to sign up to support the Weddell Sea proposal, and is focusing publicity on that - the biggest of the three proposals. All groups say action is needed this meeting to show that CAAMLR is credible. Ultimately, the success of the marine reserve network rests on having each type of habitat protected, not just one or two.

Asked for her assessment of this meeting's prospects, ASOC's Claire Christian told Newsroom she was optimistic about the East Antarctic proposal, since changes have been made to the original proposal to address concerns by countries and almost all CCAMLR members have agreed it is ready to be adopted. Russia and China's objections were about language and specific regulations rather than substantive issues with the conservation justifications or science, she says.

"The other proposed MPAs, for the Weddell Sea and the Antarctic Peninsula, are much newer, but are based on years of solid scientific work and consultation," she says. "We believe both are ready to be approved pending final tweaks, but the prospects of that happening are determined by whether the countries that make the decisions are ready to engage."

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