Antarctic Mining Ban Reaffirmed

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The 29 countries party to the Antarctic Treaty unanimously reaffirmed their commitment to a ban on mining activities in the Antarctic on June 1.

The group agreed to a resolution at the 39th Antarctic Treaty Consultative Meeting (ATCM) stating their “firm commitment” to retain and continue to implement the ban “as a matter of highest priority.” The ban is part of the Protocol on Environmental Protection to the Antarctic Treaty (also called the Madrid Protocol).

The resolution was initiated by the United States to commemorate the 25th anniversary of the 1991 signing of the Protocol.

In addition to commemorating the 25th Anniversary, the Resolution is in part a response to inaccurate media reports that the Protocol or the Antarctic Treaty “expire” in 2048. However, this is only a date when a review of the Protocol could be requested.

“There is often speculation that countries involved in Antarctic governance intend to review and change the Protocol in 2048 to allow mining,” said Claire Christian, Acting Executive Director of the Antarctic and Southern Ocean Coalition (ASOC), an organization that represents environmental NGOs at the ATCM. “This resolution sends a clear message that this is not in fact the case and that Parties stand firm in their commitment that preserving the continent as a place of peace and science is more important than possible financial gain.”

The Protocol is a landmark environmental protection agreement that requires strict rules and
procedures for the conduct of activities in the Antarctic. Prior to the signing of the Protocol, Antarctic Treaty Parties negotiated an agreement regulating mining in the Antarctic. However, the mining agreement never entered into force.

The decision not to ratify the mining agreement was led by Australia and France, and came after years of campaigning for a “World Park Antarctica” by the ASOC and its member groups. Though the Protocol contains many important provisions, the mining ban is especially critical because there would be no way to conduct mineral resource extraction activities without causing irreversible damage to one of the world’s last great wildernesses, says Christian.

The ATCM also issued the "Santiago Declaration on the Twenty Fifth Anniversary of the signing of the Protocol on Environmental Protection to the Antarctic Treaty" to confirm their commitment to all of the principles of the Protocol and to pledge further efforts to implement the Protocol and “preserve and protect the Antarctic terrestrial and marine environments.”

The ATCM also discussed Antarctic climate change and tourism, two issues with implications for the environmental protection of the region. With information indicating that the impact of climate change and ocean acidification is already having an impact on Antarctica and its ecosystems, the Antarctic Treaty System has become increasingly focused on developing ways to monitor and respond to climate change.

This was demonstrated by a joint workshop held between the ATCM’s Committee for Environmental Protection (CEP) and the Scientific Committee of the Commission for the Conservation of Antarctic Marine Living Resources (CCAMLR). CCAMLR is an international, treaty-based organization with the objective of conserving Antarctic marine life. The workshop acknowledged that marine and terrestrial protected areas can serve as important scientific reference areas that can increase understanding of the impacts of climate change.

The ATCM discussed tourism numbers, which are projected to increase to their highest level ever in the coming year. ASOC believes that this will require an additional response from Antarctic Treaty Parties to ensure that this activity has a minimal footprint on the fragile Antarctic environment. “Parties are developing a strategic vision for tourism, but there are key actions that should be taken now, such as prohibiting the development of land-based infrastructure, to preserve the unique values of the Antarctic region,” said Ricardo Roura, ASOC’s tourism expert.

The 39th ATCM was held from May 23 to June 1, 2016 in Santiago, Chile.