China, Russia block Antarctic protection

China and Russia have blocked an agreement to protect key areas of the Antarctic Ocean. Conservationists blame commercial interests and political tensions.

The Commission for the Conservation of Antarctic Marine Living Resources (CCAMLR) has failed to agree to protect key areas in the Ross Sea and East Antarctica at its annual meeting in Hobart, Australia following moves to block consensus by China and Russia.

It is the fourth time the Commission, made up of 24 nations and the EU, failed to reach the consensus necessary for the creation of a marine reserve that would protect these regions against overexploitation. The Commission was established in 1982 with the express objective of conserving Antarctic marine life in response to increasing commercial interest in krill and other marine resources.

Disappointment for conservationists

The Southern Ocean is home to more than 10,000 unique species including most of the world's penguins, whales, seabirds, colossal squid and the Antarctic toothfish - the main target of fishing companies in the region. The Southern Ocean is also a crucial area for scientific research, both for studying how intact marine ecosystems function and for determining the impacts of global climate change.

Conservation groups are bitterly disappointed by the outcome. The partners of the Antarctic Ocean
Alliance (AOA), a coalition of environmental groups, said this failure to reach consensus for the fourth time calls into question CCAMLR's ability to deliver on its conservation commitments.

Orcas or killer whales are at home in the Ross Sea

Two proposals for the protection of the Ross Sea and East Antarctic coastal regions were on the table but blocked at this week's meeting.

"It is appalling that while the majority of CCAMLR Members are more than ready to create significant marine protection in Antarctic waters, China and Russia have again blocked all efforts to negotiate a successful outcome," said Mark Epstein, executive director of the Antarctic and Southern Ocean Coalition (ASOC).

**Bad news for whales and penguins**

He explicitly commended the efforts of the United States, New Zealand, Australia, the European Union and France during the last four years to promote Antarctic marine protection. He also welcomed strong support for the Marine Protected Areas (MPAs) from fishing countries like Korea and Norway

According to Richard Page from Greenpeace, "This year's failure denigrates the reputation of CCAMLR and is symptomatic of a dangerous global trend where geopolitical interests override any genuine efforts to protect the oceans for the sake of future generations."

Andrea Kavanagh, responsible for the Southern Ocean at Pew, stressed that Antarctica had been recognized as a special place for peace and science since 1959.

"It is regrettable that CCAMLR, faced with the objections from Russia and China, cannot live up to that promise," she said.

"Another year of inaction means another year that these near-pristine waters and their remarkable
biodiversity are open to the threat of industrial fishing. The proposed designations would have ensured the long-term protection of many species, including penguins, seals and whales.”

Cold war in icy waters

A joint US-NZ proposal to designate a Ross Sea MPA of 1.32 million square kilometers (509,000 square miles), of which 1.25 million square kilometers would be proposed as "no take," was under consideration. The Ross Sea is often referred to as "The Last Ocean" due to its status as one of the most pristine oceans remaining on earth.

The proposal would ban fishing from most of the reserve while allowing for limited scientific catches in some areas.

A second proposal by Australia, France and the European Union would create four smaller reserves off the coast of the East Antarctica, covering 1.2 million square kilometers.

Russia and other countries carry out research in the Antarctic

Russia has been a key opponent of the protection agreement at previous meetings. Political tensions between the US and Russia over Ukraine are thought to have played a role in motivating Russia's objections this time.

"Antarctica is one of the world’s last untouched wildernesses and is critical for scientific research, both for studying how intact marine ecosystems function and for monitoring the impacts of climate change," said Bob Zuur, manager of World Wide Fund for Nature’s (WWF) Antarctica program. "A network of large-scale, permanent marine protected areas in the Ross Sea and East Antarctica would build on the spirit of political cooperation in the Antarctic Treaty and create a lasting legacy for future generations."

Russia is one of several nations that have fishing interests in Antarctica's waters. The Ross Sea is home to the Antarctic toothfish, a lucrative species that is often marketed in North America as Chilean sea bass. Andrea Kavanagh said it might be time to consider new approaches, such as consumers or even nations refusing to buy fish that has been caught inside the proposed reserve boundaries.

More than 1.4 million people around the world have joined the global call for large-scale marine protection in Antarctica over the last three years and thousands have taken action through online petitions, social media and emails to key world leaders to call for protection.

Mark Epstein, the executive director of the Antarctic and Southern Ocean Coalition environmental advocacy group, said that while geopolitical issues were likely a factor this time, it was too soon to give up on the consensus approach.

"Our profound hope is that all the members will come back to the original reasons and meaning for creating the convention," he said.