Conservationists push for protected marine areas in Southern Ocean

Sydney, Oct 29 (EFE).- Ecologists urged the Commission for the Conservation of Antarctic Marine Living Resources (CCAMLR) to approve plans for establishing Marine Protected Areas in Southern Ocean and Antarctic waters before the commission ends its annual meeting on Friday.

"Only few hours are left to take urgent actions in order to save the Southern Ocean," Robert Brown, a former leader of the Australian Green Party and ex-president of Sea Shepherd Australia, said on Wednesday.

The meeting was being held in Hobart, capital of the Australian island state of Tasmania, where the commission was created 34 years ago. It opened last week with 24 delegations taking part, comprising 240 marine scientists, resource managers and politicians from around the world.

The meeting will also discuss a joint proposal by the United States and New Zealand to protect an area of 1.3 million sq km (0.8 million sq miles) in the Ross Sea.

Delegates were likewise set to consider an initiative advanced by the European Union (EU), Australia and France, which calls for protection of an area of 1 million sq km (630,000 sq miles) in western Antarctic waters.

"Each of these proposals could result in the establishment of the world's largest marine protected area," the Antarctic Ocean Alliance, a platform of ecologist groups, noted in a statement.

The commission reached an agreement five years ago on establishing a system of marine protected areas for its 2012 meeting.

"During the past three CCAMLR meetings, we had hoped for action on marine protection (...), the time is now for action," Mark Epstein, executive director of the Antarctic and Southern Ocean Coalition, said at a press conference.

The World Wildlife Fund's (WWF) Antarctic and Southern Ocean program manager, Bob Zuur, said that Antarctic waters make up one of the world's last untouched ecosystems. Their preservation is of critical importance for scientific studies of marine biodiversity and the impact of climate change.

Debate at the Hobart conclave also focused on initiatives to monitor and reduce illegal...
fishing, inspect and monitor boats, establish catch quotas for krill, toothfish and other fish species, as well as creating catch quotas for fishing research surveys that help improve scientific knowledge.