Japan’s chance to develop Antarctic marine sanctuary

BY YURI ONODERA AND CLAIRE CHRISTIAN

In June, U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry hosted leaders from almost 90 countries (including Japan) and from many fields, including government, civil society and academia, at a conference in Washington to discuss how to better protect the oceans.

Many participants made public commitments to create new, large marine protected areas (MPAs) or marine sanctuaries. Some of these commitments are especially noteworthy because they fall within exclusive economic zones (EEZs), the ocean area over which a country has exclusive control.

As EEZs are often the areas most heavily used by commercial and recreational fishers, tourists and industry, it is often difficult to protect them because these groups will protest any restrictions on their activities.

Nevertheless, the countries making these commitments have realized that without ensuring the health of the oceans, they are putting future generations at risk. They have finally realized that, as ocean explorer Sylvia Earle says, “no blue, no green”: Humans on land depend on the oceans for survival.

As an island nation, Japan is perhaps even more dependent on the ocean than many other countries. Even so, there are examples throughout history of humans failing to protect the natural systems they rely on until it is too late.

Kerry’s oceans conference is a welcome sign that nations are ready to learn from these mistakes and make tough but bold leadership decisions to preserve the marine environment. Japan can and should contribute to this effort.

One major way that Japan can participate in this new era of leadership on ocean issues is to look to an ocean very far away from home — the Southern Ocean, in Antarctica.

For several years now, the Commission on the Conservation of Antarctic Marine Living Resources (CCAMLR), has been discussing the creation of a series of MPAs in two regions of the Antarctic, the Ross Sea and East Antarctica.
CCAMLR member countries have been reluctant to approve these MPAs, concerned that they might restrict future fishing activities. But CCAMLR member countries, which include Japan, have pledged to implement a precautionary ecosystem approach to Antarctica’s marine environment.

MPAs are one of the best tools we have to ensure that our oceans remain healthy and vibrant far into the future.

Although the Southern Ocean has been subjected to some environmental damage, including from sealing, whaling and fishing, it has still experienced much less destructive activity from humans than most of the world’s oceans.

That’s why now is the perfect time to protect the Ross Sea and East Antarctica. The Ross Sea is one of the most pristine large marine ecosystems, a fantastic natural laboratory for scientists to study how healthy ecosystems work as well as the home for a diverse array of species from glass sponges to Adélie penguins. East Antarctica also has unique habitats and geographic features, as well as vibrant populations of Antarctic species like the emperor penguin. Extensive scientific analysis has clearly demonstrated the ecological importance of the regions proposed for protection.

Many MPAs are established to help an area recover after it has been harmed. With East Antarctica and the Ross Sea, we have an opportunity to keep them healthy. This is in line with the precautionary approach, which seeks to prevent harm to the ecosystem.

MPAs elsewhere, particularly those that do not permit fishing, have proven that precaution has considerable benefits, which even fishermen enjoy. No-take MPAs often result in the “spillover” effect — the tendency for fish populations in those MPAs to increase dramatically and then migrate outside them.

New Zealand has had marine reserves (a type of MPA) in place for years, with the result that scientists have been able to do research that would not have been possible in a nonreserve area. Thus MPAs not only fulfill conservation goals. They can also serve as valuable control areas, which are vital for scientific research. Without them, scientists may not be able to truly understand how marine ecosystems work.

Starting Oct. 20, CCAMLR governments will meet again in Hobart, Australia, to discuss the Ross Sea and East Antarctica MPAs. Japan now has an opportunity to be a leader and ensure that meaningful MPAs are designated this year. There has been a lot of debate and discussion about the proposed MPAs, and proponents have made significant changes to accommodate concerns and requests from other countries.

Some of the remaining opposition appears related to a general mistrust of MPAs. These countries argue that scientific supervision of fisheries is as good as designation of an MPA. The reality is that even with good science, we need MPAs as insurance policies for our oceans. They ensure conservation of both the broader ecosystem and any fisheries,
protecting significant areas from harm and providing undisturbed habitats for marine life. In an era of climate change, their ability to serve as reference or control areas is important.

As a major fishing nation, Japan must be a leader in protecting the long-term vitality of the oceans so that future generations can continue to rely on them. MPAs are one of the strongest tools we have to maintain the health of the marine environment.

The public has recognized this. Over one million people have signed petitions calling for the designation of MPAs in Antarctica. Although they live far from the Antarctic, these people recognize that we cannot survive without healthy oceans.

Antarctica and its Southern Ocean do not belong to any one nation. Japan must join with other nations to live up to its obligations as a CCAMLR member, and act in the best interest of all humankind to preserve the unique and fragile Antarctic marine environment. Now is the time to do it.

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