Protecting the “Last Ocean”

BY WINNIE BIRD – OCTOBER 21, 2014

Delegates from 24 countries and EU to debate massive marine preserve in the Antarctic

Earlier this fall, the Associated Press reported that a remarkable creature had been pulled from Antarctica’s Ross Sea. According to the article, the colossal squid was “as long as a minibus” with “tentacles like fire hoses and eyes like dinner plates,” and was still clinging to its dinner when fishermen on the San Aspiring toothfish boat, from New Zealand, hauled it from the water this January. The unfortunate cephalopod was then transferred to Wellington, New Zealand, some 2,000 miles north, and tuck into a freezer for later scientific examination.

It was a fitting find for the icy waters that are often called the world’s “Last Ocean.” Located adjacent to Earth’s most remote continent and shut in by ice for 10 months of the year, the Ross Sea has so far escaped the grim fate of overfishing, pollution, and invasive species decimating Earth’s other oceans. Its frozen shores and crystal-clear waters teem with species adapted to the harsh climate: Adélie and emperor penguins, Weddell seals, killer whales, Arctic petrels, and many more. It’s the sort of place that reassures us wilderness still exists, beyond our reach and full of mysterious creatures.

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An adult penguin with a chick. The Ross Sea teems with species adapted to the harsh climate, including Adélie and emperor penguins.

Photo by John B. Weller

Aspiring suggests, however, that image is no longer entirely accurate.

“With increased technology over the last 10 years, more and more fishing vessels are looking towards the Antarctic oceans,” says Mark Epstein, executive director of the Antarctic and Southern Ocean Coalition, a network of conservation NGOs focused on the region.

This week and next, government representatives from 24 countries plus the EU will attempt to permanently protect the Ross Sea and waters off East Antarctica from fishing and other threats by creating two huge marine protected areas (MPAs). Three times in the past three years, Russia, the Ukraine, and China have blocked attempts to do the same. This time around, Russia’s troubled relationship with America and Europe could make the task even harder.
The delegates meeting in Hobart, Australia, belong to the Commission for the Conservation of Antarctic Marine Living Resources, or CCAMLR (pronounced camel-R). Formed in 1981, the fishery management and conservation body is comprised of countries with an interest in the region, including the US, China, Russia, and Japan. Their decisions are taken by consensus — which means any one country can block action.

CCAMLR has a strong conservation mandate, and in the past has acted successfully to reduce seabird bycatch and manage krill fishing. In 2005, its members agreed to set up a network of MPAs throughout the Southern Ocean, which encircles Antarctica. The Ross Sea and East Antarctic MPAs would be the first major step towards that goal, protecting a combined area six times as big as California — about 2.5 million square kilometers. By comparison, the Pacific Remote Island National Monument, which President Obama expanded in September to become the world’s largest MPA, measures 2 million square kilometers. The Ross Sea reserve was proposed by the US and New Zealand, and the East Antarctic reserve by the EU, Australia, and France.

Andrea Kavanagh, who directs the Pew Charitable Trust’s Southern Ocean conservation campaign and is attending this year’s CCAMLR meeting, says protecting the Ross Sea immediately is crucial. “The Ross Sea is one of the most intact marine ecosystems left on the planet, with the most intact trophic levels,” she says. “It’s important to preserve places like that for several reasons. Number one, we don’t have many chances to preserve completely healthy ecosystems anymore, so we should take those opportunities just for the sake of the ecosystem. But it also could act as a really great climate reference area, where scientists can look at how a healthy ecosystem reacts to climate change versus how an unhealthy ecosystem reacts.”

Climate change will likely reduce Ross Sea ice in the long term. In the short term, the area is actually cooling, and the IPCC predicts is will stay icy longer than other parts of Antarctica due to topography and changes in atmospheric circulation. Fishing is a more imminent threat. In 2013, boats pulled over 3,300 tons of toothfish from the Ross Sea, sending it around the world for sale as high-priced “Chilean sea bass.” The Marine Stewardship Council has certified the fishery as sustainable because current regulations limit catch.

But ecologist David Ainley and others with long experience studying the area argue that industrial fishing of any kind in the Ross Sea is unacceptable. In Peter Young’s 2013 film The Last Ocean, Ainley points out that toothfish is the Ross Sea’s top fish predator, and criticizes the proposed MPA for skirting major fishing grounds.

So far, CCAMLR’s members have failed to agree on even that imperfect reserve. Epstein and Kavanagh say Russia is primarily to blame.

“Russia has come up with a whole variety of sideline moves that have kept negotiations from happening,” says Epstein, who is serving as head of civil-society delegates to the Hobart meeting.

In 2012, the first year the Ross Sea and East Antarctic proposals were up for possible approval, Russia asked for more time to study the science, Kavanagh says. The next year, after a special meeting to address that issue, Russian representatives claimed
CCAMLR didn't have the legal authority to establish the protected areas. Ukraine and China joined in blocking consensus.

“We have worked hard to try to get all facets of the Russian government involved and engaged in Antarctica,” says Epstein. “Of course it’s a tremendously difficult time to break through when so much else geopolitically is going on.”

US-Russia relations unraveled earlier this year after Russia annexed Crimea and the US and other countries responded with harsh sanctions. But Vladimir Krever, Biodiversity Program Coordinator at WWF-Russia, says the clash at CCAMLR has more to do with economics than politics.

“The Ross Sea already has 70 different types of regulations [on fishing],” Krever says. “These regulations are clear and understandable, but to close a huge area — it raises many questions. How practical is it? It would be like taking the Siberian tiger's entire natural habitat, and ignoring the large number of economic interests in that area, but saying 'let's close this whole territory'. It's not realistic.” He adds that Japan, Norway, and South Korea questioned the proposals as well.

The Ross Sea is currently cooling, but in the long term, climate change will likely reduce ice in the area.

Russian news reports have explained the country’s opposition by pointing to everything from bickering within the delegation to arcane legal arguments to claims that the Ross Sea fishery is already managed sustainably. One article even suggested Russia needs to maintain a fishing fleet to pay for its scientific activities in the area.

Whatever the real reason for Russia’s opposition, Epstein says he is “pessimistic” about prospects for success this year. Failure to reach an agreement raises concerns
that go beyond the proposals on the table. “CAMLR’s inability to move forward on the MPAs reflects a changing direction from the early years when there was so much good work being done. We need to ensure the system lives up to its own articles, which put conservation and the precautionary principle up front,” he says.

Kavanagh is more hopeful about protecting Antarctic seas in the long term. She points out that Russia has joined with Germany to propose another MPA in the Wedell Sea, an important habitat for seals, whales, and penguins on the side of Antarctica closest to Argentina. “That gives us hope for the future. If [Russia is] willing to negotiate on that marine reserve, then eventually they’ll come around on the other two. There is a lot of hope that it will happen eventually. People aren’t giving up,” she says.

*Mary Elizabeth Malinkin contributed reporting to this article.*