Ross Sea proposed sanctuary slashed

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The Government has bowed to international pressure and slashed the size of a proposed marine sanctuary in Antarctica’s Ross Sea.

A joint New Zealand-United States plan for the reserve was today scaled back from 2.3 million to 1.34 million square kilometres.

The original bid included a 1.6sq km no-take zone which would only allow fishing for scientific research. That is now 1.25sq km.

Restrictions already exist in the pristine environment, but officials in Wellington and Washington were fighting to establish the world’s biggest marine protection area (MPA) to protect the waters and overfishing of toothfish.

Fishing nations, including Norway, China, Japan, Chile and South Korea, were opposed to the size of the reserve and Russia scuttled the bid at a special meeting in Germany in July.

Conservationists this week warned the NZ-US proposal would be diluted to try to win support at fresh talks by the 25-nation Commission for the Conservation of Antarctic Marine Living Resources (CCAMLR) in Tasmania next month.

They feared important toothfish breeding grounds in the north of the sea would be removed from the MPA, along with an area around the Scott Seamounts. The seamount is an important habitat for organisms that could not survive elsewhere – but is also highly productive for the fishing industry.

The revised proposal was quietly posted on the Foreign Affairs Ministry website today afternoon.

The spawning zone is cut back – but restrictions will now apply year-round, instead of seasonally. Another protection zone, in north-east, has also been scrapped. And protected waters around the Scott Seamount are reduced.

MFAT says the changes have been made on the advice of CCAMLR’s Scientific Committee.

"The Scientific Committee was not convinced that there was adequate evidence to justify large areas of the north being closed to protect spawning toothfish," the website explains.

The revised proposal would still protect a full range of habitats, ecosystems and areas of particular ecological significance, it said.

There is no detail on how long the MPA would be in effect. Some countries want a sunset clause which would see the restrictions expire after 10-30 years and be reviewed.

There is also no word on whether the reductions are enough to secure the support of opponents.

Foreign Minister Murray McCully was unavailable for comment.

Lobby groups earlier today urged the Government not to cave in on the protection plan.

Last Ocean Trust co-founder Peter Young said the original proposal was robust. The Ross Sea is home to many species found nowhere else on the planet and is critical for scientific research, particularly into global climate change, he said.

"New Zealand and the United States need to back the huge weight of scientific evidence they themselves prepared and presented to CCAMLR."

Antarctic and Southern Ocean Coalition executive director Jim Barnes believed it would be a "huge
strategic mistake" to wind back the proposal without first securing support.

Steve Campbell of the Antarctic Ocean Alliance, an umbrella of 30 conservation organisations, echoed these concerns.

"[We] would be deeply concerned that the US and New Zealand could be giving away too much, leaving us with a protected area that reduces protection for the Ross Sea."

The toothfish catch is worth about $20 million a year to New Zealand. The international fishery now takes about 3000 tonnes of the fish - also known as Chilean sea bass - from the Ross Sea.

Antarctic waters make up about 10 per cent of the world's seas and are home to almost 10,000 species, including penguins, whales and seals.

Geoff Keey, spokesman for the Antarctic Ocean Alliance, believes it was a "tactical mistake" to reduce the proposal with talking to other CCAMLR countries.

"Cutting the amount of protected areas from 2.3 million sq km to 1.35 million sq km is a reduction of more than 40% and many important elements of the package are yet to be discussed, such as whether the MPA is permanent," he said.

"On the plus side, the US and NZ have not reduced the scale on the slope and shelf which is a critical area. It is pretty clear that further negotiations are unlikely to strengthen the proposal so it's a big step down in terms of Southern Ocean protection."

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