Russian ‘fishing interests’ threaten bid for Antarctic conservation area

EXCLUSIVE / A vote today (16 July) on whether to declare a marine protection area over an Antarctic body of water seven times the size of Germany is hanging in the balance due to Russian and Ukrainian fishing interests, the head of a European delegation to the talks has told EurActiv.

Background

The EU proposed creating a system of marine protected areas in Antarctica – the East Antarctic Representative System of Marine Protected Areas (MPAs) - at a special meeting of the Commission for the Conservation of Antarctic Living Resources (CCAMLR) on 15–16 July in Bremerhaven, Germany.

At the same meeting, the USA and New Zealand proposed the establishment of a Marine Protected Area in the Ross Sea. The EU's proposal, presented together with Australia and France (on behalf of its overseas territories), aimed to ensure conservation of seven ocean regions with particular open ocean and seabed biodiversity.

The CCAMLR is an intergovernmental organisation with 25 Members, including the European Union. It is a platform for international collaboration in the Antarctic focusing on the conservation and sustainable use of Antarctic marine living resources.

The meeting in Bremerhaven followed a discussion on MPAs that took place at CCAMLR’s Annual Meeting in October 2012, where no consensus was found.

Representatives of 25 countries are in the German city of Bremerhaven to discuss a proposal backed by the EU, US and New Zealand for a fishing ban in the Ross Sea, a deep bay in the Southern Antarctic.

The Ross Sea is one of the most intact – and fragile – marine ecosystems on Earth, which stretches for 2.6 million square kilometres. The nearest land is New Zealand and Australia.

But hopes of a deal are fading, due to nominal objections raised by a blocking minority about the scientific basis for the ‘protected area’ designation.

“Russia and Ukraine have fishing interests and are a little bit afraid that these could be compromised in some way,” said Walter Dubner, who heads the German team at the talks held by the Commission for the Conservation of Antarctic Marine Living Resources (CCAMLR).

“It is all about fishing,” Dubner added, speaking on 15 July. “That is their major concern.”
Because of the Commission’s consensus model for decision-taking, a veto by just one country can stop a proposal being adopted.

Terje Løbach, the CCAMLR’s chair, told a press conference in Bremerhaven that Kyiv and Moscow had challenged the Commission’s right to declare a protected area in the Ross Sea, the environmental necessity of doing so, and any protected area’s duration, and size.

The sea covered by the proposed marine protection area provides a home for dolphins, seals and penguins, and roughly equals the size of all the reserves created around the world so far.

By late Tuesday afternoon, the debate at the talks had gravitated towards potential compromise options, focused on the scientific case for protecting two parts of the Ross Sea, in particular.

**Toothfish spawning ground**

Chris Jones, the chair of the CCAMLR’s scientific committee told the Bremerhaven press conference that scientific data to support the protected claim for the north of the Ross Sea – a spawning ground for toothfish – had been contested.

But this part of the sea contained a substantial chain of sea mounds, he insisted.

“We have established that the best available science has been used to underpin these proposals,” Jones said. “It is really up to the Commission now and the values of the various members of CCAMLR, and their political will.”

If no agreement is reached today, a second Commission will be held in Hobart, Australia, later this year.

Intense efforts have been made to sign off on a deal in Bremerhaven, including one heated scientific committee meeting that ran through to 5:30 a.m. on 14 July.

But as talks wound towards stalemate late yesterday afternoon, observers spoke of proceedings descending into a mess, and delegates visibly appearing upset.

Dubner himself played down the chances of an agreement today. “This process needs some time for discussions and clarifications, and you can’t do it overnight,” he said.

“It is difficult to reach solutions in three years,” he added. “Sometimes it takes ten years or even longer - although I wouldn’t say that will necessarily be the case with MPA’s.”

**Positions**

“Russia and the Ukraine’s challenges of the legality of CCAMLR to establish MPAs are groundless,” said Steve Campbell, the director of the Antarctic Ocean Alliance (AOA). “All CCAMLR parties have previously agreed that CCAMLR can create MPAs. There is a full mandate for CCAMLR’s work.

“There is no question that CCAMLR has legal competence to designate MPAs,” agreed Jim Barnes, executive director of the Antarctic and Southern Ocean Coalition (ASOC). “We hope these problems will be resolved quickly and are looking forward to the Commission designating these MPAs by the close of the Bremerhaven meeting.”
“One wonders if Russia’s efforts are a stalling tactic designed to bring negotiations to a halt,” said Andrea Kavanagh of The Pew Charitable Trusts. “At the very least this move puts international cooperation and goodwill -- two key ingredients needed for global marine conservation – in jeopardy. We urge world leaders to appeal to Russia to work with other countries to govern the ocean we all share.”

Next Steps

- 23 Oct. –1 Nov. 2013: CCAMLR conference in Hobart, Australia