World's largest protected marine area could soon be declared by international Antarctic conference in Hobart

By Linda Hunt

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An international meeting in Hobart will consider a proposal to create the world's biggest marine protected area.

For the fifth consecutive year, the Commission for Conservation of Antarctic Marine Living Resources (CCAMLR) will consider establishing two massive marine protected areas.

The two proposals cover a combined area of 2.2 million square kilometres.

One of the proposed sites, based in East Antarctica, was put forward by Australia, France and the European Union in 2010 and would create the world's biggest marine protected area if approved.

According to Australian scientists, the area supports important ecosystems and contains distinctive deepwater flora and fauna.

The East Antarctic Marine Protected Area (MPA) has been endorsed three times by CCAMLR's scientific committee but to be approved it needs unanimous support from all 25 member nations.

Last year it was blocked by China and Russia but it is hoped this year their opposition has thawed.

The commission was picketed by conservationists dressed as penguins who voiced their displeasure at the blocking of the proposals.

Andrea Kavanagh from the Antarctic Ocean Alliance said protecting the Southern Ocean was important for all nations.

"[The proposal] actually protects the areas of most concern, vulnerable marine ecosystems as well as biodiversity hotspots," she said.

Marine protected areas 'critical' for climate study

Behind closed doors, 240 delegates from across the globe will spend the next two weeks thrashing out the proposals.

Australian deputy commissioner for CCAMLR Gillian Slocum said the proposals had been revised since China and Russia blocked them last year.

"We've had to make some concessions on the proposal, however we stand strongly behind the proposal that we presented to this year's meeting and feel that it is a strong and robust proposal," she said.

"We like to come into every meeting optimistic."

Ms Slocum said CCAMLR's consensus-based approach to decisions was a strength.

"Decisions take a little bit longer but you know that when a decision is made it reflects all members' views and not just a majority," she said.

Mark Epstein from the Antarctic and Southern Ocean Coalition said he was hopeful this year with Russia chairing the international meeting.
"It has been four or five years, and it has been well reviewed and there have been changes and there have been efforts to meet all parties," he said.

"As climate change becomes ever more present the need for marine protected areas as reference zones in the climate change era is critical.

"After all, Antarctica is ground zero for climate change."

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