

Russia and China Thwart Dream for Marine Sanctuary in Antarctica

November 03, 2014



A Weddell seal lies atop ice at Cape Denison, Commonwealth Bay, East Antarctica.

China and Russia have thwarted an international attempt to create the world's largest ocean sanctuary in Antarctica as both nations eye the region's rich reserves of fish and krill.

The Commission for the Conservation of Antarctic Marine Living Resources, or CCAMLR, wound up a 10-day meeting in Hobart, Australia, on Friday without the consensus needed for a deal to conserve and manage the marine ecosystems in the Southern Ocean.

While Russia blocked conservation proposals for a fourth consecutive time, China's refusal to back the international plan came as a surprise to many delegates after previous statements of support for conservation and marine protection.

Ukraine, which previously took the same stance as Russia, this year voted in favor of the proposals.

"We had hoped to be able to create what would have been the largest marine-protected area in

the world and had been working on that for several years," U.S. delegation leader Evan Bloom said.

The objective of the CCAMLR, which was established by international treaty in 1982, is the conservation of Antarctic marine life "while providing for rational use" that takes global food security into account.

The European Union and 24 nations are members of the consensus-based organization and a further 11 countries have signed its convention.

There were hopes for agreement at the meeting after Australia, France and the European Union offered to cut the size of a proposed Marine Protected Area, or MPA, in east Antarctica to a million square kilometers from 1.9 million square kilometers first proposed in 2011.

The other MPA proposal, submitted by New Zealand and the United States covers 1.3 million square kilometers in the Ross Sea. Together the two MPAs would have comprised the world's largest marine sanctuary and set catch limits for krill, tooth fish and other fin fish species.

China "challenged almost every conservation mandate that was presented" during the two weeks of talks, Andrea Kavanagh, a delegate and director of the pro-conservation Pew Charitable Trusts said. China was "an across the board conservation-spoiler" to the plan, she added.

Richard Page, CCAMLR delegate and Oceans Campaigner for Greenpeace, said the outcome was disappointing because "the waters around Antarctica are among the least damaged ecosystems in the world."

"It's a shame that geopolitical interests are overriding genuine efforts to protect large areas of the ocean for future generations."

Antarctica is home to more than 10,000 species including most of the world's penguins, whales, seabirds, colossal squid and Antarctic tooth fish. The Southern Ocean represents about 10 percent of the Earth's surface.

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