

MPA NEWS



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Perspective: Victory for Antarctica's Ross Sea - An inside look at the long road to the world's largest MPA

By Rodolfo Werner, Antarctic and Southern Ocean Coalition

This October, something extraordinary took place in the Southern Hemisphere. After years of negotiations at the Commission for the Conservation of Antarctic Marine Living Resources (CCAMLR), 24 countries and the European Union finally agreed to designate the world's largest MPA in the Ross Sea. This marks the first time that world leaders have agreed — and by consensus — to protect a large area of the high seas from commercial fishing.

This victory, while falling short of a permanent MPA designation, is a significant development for marine protection in the Southern Ocean and elsewhere on the high seas. It was a long time coming. Efforts to advocate for a protected area in the Ross Sea date back to 2002 when renowned Antarctic scientist David Ainley declared his personal mission to establish an MPA there. The documentary film [The Last Ocean](#) later played a key role in raising the profile for a protected area in the Ross Sea, joined by efforts from the [Antarctic and Southern Ocean Coalition](#) (ASOC) and the [Antarctic Ocean Alliance](#) (AOA), the latter of which was established and supported by [The Pew Charitable Trusts](#) and [Oceans 5](#).

Years of negotiation, stagnation

In October 2012, the US and New Zealand submitted separate proposals for an MPA in the Ross Sea to CCAMLR's Scientific Committee. After behind-the-scenes discussions, the two nations combined these into a joint proposal to be considered further by the Commission. By this time another proposal — to designate a network of MPAs in the waters off East Antarctica, completely separate from the Ross Sea — had also been introduced by Australia, France, and the European Union.

Both the Ross Sea and East Antarctica MPA proposals were then discussed at a special session of the Scientific Committee and the Commission in Bremerhaven, Germany, in July 2013. The special session was only the second time that CCAMLR has convened a session of this nature. The Bremerhaven session was to focus on agreeing to designate both MPA proposals.

Unfortunately, the special session in Bremerhaven failed to result in any MPAs. Russia, with some support from Ukraine, challenged the legal basis that would allow for the creation of large-scale marine reserves in Antarctica. In addition, fishing nations — led primarily by Norway — expressed concerns about the scale of the proposals, the duration of the MPAs if adopted, and the levels of protection in both MPA proposals (no-take areas versus multiple-use). In response to the fishing concerns, proponents of the Ross Sea MPA reduced its area by over 40% at one point. (There were similar reductions for the East Antarctica proposal, which has been reduced over time from a network of seven representative MPAs to just three. That proposal is still wending its way through CCAMLR.)

Despite changes to the Ross Sea proposal, the years that followed Bremerhaven were mired in stagnation. Although Norway came to endorse the Ross Sea plan by 2014, Russia — with support from China — repeatedly blocked the proposal from moving forward.

Negotiations continued, however. China pushed for creation of a Krill Research Zone (KRZ) in the proposal, allowing an area in which controlled research fishing for krill would be allowed. Following bilateral discussions on this between the US and China, a KRZ was added in October 2015 and China came on board.

Although a wide body of research shows the benefits of a permanent duration for MPAs, several CCAMLR member states advocated for sunset clauses for the Ross Sea MPA of 50 years or less. In 2015 the proposal's duration clause was changed from a "soft stop", which would have required consensus to cease the MPA, to a "hard stop" that includes a firm expiration date. During the October 2016 CCAMLR meeting in Hobart, Japan and China continued to advocate behind closed doors for a duration as low as 20 years. This advocacy continued until the final moments of the meeting's Ross Sea MPA negotiations, even after Russia had agreed to a proposal for a 50-year duration.

Working behind the scenes

The evolving discussions around the Ross Sea, East Antarctica, and a broader network of MPAs in the Southern Ocean have been a joint effort among all 25 CCAMLR members and the international NGO community advocating for their designation. Under the umbrella of ASOC and AOA, The Pew Charitable Trusts, WWF and Greenpeace mounted a global effort to build support among opponent countries through various tactics. These included public awareness-building through in-country media, active policy outreach with proponent countries to minimize further concessions, and — by far the most effective effort — encouraging high-level outreach at all levels of government between the United States / New Zealand and their counterparts in China and the Russian Federation.

In addition to high-level outreach, actions on the ground were critical to building a network of support within the Russian government and NGO community. It can be complicated to work in Russia: Russian NGOs cannot receive any funding from foreign organizations, so it is difficult to organize workshops or meetings to promote issues and support any organizations financially. Proponent NGOs worked with their Russian NGO colleagues on the ground and established relationships with key Russian officials to the extent possible. They also liaised with organizations that had existing connections with Russian counterparts, including the National Geographic Society. The intent was to get a sense of the real concerns of the Russians. This all complemented the bilateral government-level discussions between the US and Russia that were key in paving the road and unblocking the establishment of the Ross Sea MPA.

Similar efforts took place in Norway, China, Ukraine, and other nations over the years. NGOs worked closely with proponents of the Ross Sea MPA — the US and New Zealand. And there was further on-the-ground work in other CCAMLR member countries to build broad buy-in for the Ross Sea MPA.

This process took several years to line up, slowed at times due to the continually degrading relationship between the US and Russia. From US sanctions put in place due to the conflict in Crimea; later to disagreements over a proxy war in Syria; and capped off by the US government formally accusing Russia of hacking emails from one of the US's two major political parties in 2016, the ability to impact the negotiations was slow-brewing and often opportunistic. And while the Ross Sea MPA is based on the best available science, ultimately the agreements from China and Russia were largely political.

All things considered it is a time to celebrate, and to appreciate the tireless efforts of the US and New Zealand who invested a lot of time and political capital to achieve this remarkable victory for the Ross Sea MPA. This applies also to the proponents of protection for East Antarctica, who continue to push their proposal forward after many years of negotiations. It is crucial that eyes remain on the road ahead, and that support is provided to new proposals coming to the table.

With a global momentum and millions of square kilometers announced in 2016 for marine protection worldwide, CCAMLR must move forward to establish the system of large-scale MPAs in the Southern Ocean that its members previously agreed by consensus to pursue by 2012. In addition to the East Antarctica proposal, CCAMLR is considering a newly introduced MPA proposal for the Weddell Sea that came online this year. And as early as next year, CCAMLR expects to consider an MPA proposal for the Antarctic Peninsula region, with others in development across the Southern Ocean.

For more information:

Dr. Rodolfo Werner, Advisor to the Antarctic and Southern Ocean Coalition and The Pew Charitable Trusts, Argentina. Email: rodolfo.antarctica@gmail.com

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