

MPA NEWS



Published on *MPA News* (<https://mpanews.openchannels.org>)

Proposal for East Antarctic system of MPAs falls short again of international consensus

In October 2017, the Commission for the Conservation of Antarctic Marine Living Resources (CCAMLR) fell short again of reaching consensus on a proposal to designate a large new system of MPAs off the coast of East Antarctica. But objections to the plan are narrowing.

First put forward in 2012 by Australia, France, and the European Union, the proposal has undergone several changes since then to address concerns of CCAMLR members. The changes have included downsizing the proposal from 1.8 million km² to roughly 1 million km², and from seven distinct protected areas in the proposed system to three. The sites would be multiple-use, allowing commercial fishing.

With each change, opposition to the proposal has shrunk, and now counts just China and Russia as objectors among the 25 CCAMLR signatories. The proposal will be considered again at the next annual meeting of CCAMLR, in October 2018.

In addition to East Antarctica, CCAMLR is also considering newer proposals to designate MPAs [in Antarctica's Weddell Sea and off the Antarctic Peninsula](#).

In October 2016, CCAMLR [approved designation of a 1.55 million-km² MPA](#) in Antarctica's remote and relatively pristine Ross Sea following years of negotiation. Russia was the final holdout among CCAMLR members on that proposal.

What remains to be negotiated on East Antarctica

MPA News spoke with Claire Christian, interim executive director of the Secretariat of the [Antarctic and Southern Ocean Coalition](#), an organization dedicated to protecting and preserving the Antarctic environment, to see what remains to be negotiated on the East Antarctic proposal.

MPA News: Media reports on the latest CCAMLR negotiations on East Antarctica suggest the sticking points remain around fishing, namely for krill and toothfish. But the three proposed MPAs off East Antarctica would be multiple-use, allowing commercial fishing. With that being the case, why are there still objections?

Claire Christian: That is not quite the case. Fishing is restricted in these areas already, and the restrictions would increase under the MPA. Currently, under existing CCAMLR regulations, commercial fishing for toothfish is prohibited in depths shallower than 550m. There are currently some small fisheries in regions deeper than 550m, but these are limited to operating in fairly small areas. Under the proposed MPA, the 550m restriction would be expanded, and include all areas landward of the outer 550-m bathymetric contour, including areas that are deeper than 550m. Additionally, in the MPA, fishing for krill would be prohibited in the D'Urville-Mertz area as a management response to penguin-breeding failures there. The East Antarctica MPAs would therefore provide additional protections.

Aside from these areas, the East Antarctic MPA is multiple-use, which means that activities are allowed provided that they do not impact on the objectives of the MPA. This means that anyone can propose to do commercial fishing, but CCAMLR must first determine that the fishing will not impact on the objectives of the MPA before allowing it to proceed. For example, if fishing is proposed in part of the MPA where scientists have been studying the impacts of climate change, that proposal should not go forward since one of the objectives of the MPA is to serve as a climate reference area where scientists can conduct research in the absence of fishing. It might be more accurate to say that commercial fishing is *possible* in some areas.

In terms of why objections remain, Russia and China have not made it entirely clear what specific changes they would like to see in the proposal. In the past they have expressed that they do not understand how a multiple-use MPA works in practice and how proposals would be assessed.

MPA News: When the Ross Sea MPA proposal was being negotiated in its final stages, one of its main proponents was the US, which at the time was led by President Barack Obama. The nation is now led by Donald Trump. How strong is the US's support for Antarctic MPAs at this point, and have you gotten a sense that high-level outreach by US officials will be an option for bringing China and Russia on board?

Christian: We [ASOC] would love to see CCAMLR countries approach MPAs as a team effort. That is, even if a country is not an *official* MPA proponent, it would still work to get MPAs adopted. At this stage, however, I don't get the sense that the US is going to conduct high-level outreach on East Antarctica or any of the other MPAs on the table. We do expect they will continue to provide some technical or scientific expertise where needed, and continue to do lower-level outreach to their counterparts from CCAMLR countries.

Furthermore, while we believe Antarctic MPAs are a global issue worthy of global attention, for most of CCAMLR's existence its member state delegations have been able to negotiate with each other in good faith, with impressive results for the protection of the Southern Ocean. CCAMLR made a commitment [to designate a circumpolar network of MPAs in 2011](#) and we would like to see delegations directly working together on this and other issues, such as climate change, so that CCAMLR can continue its leadership in high seas conservation.

Note: This article has been revised to clarify the current state of fishing restrictions, as applied by CCAMLR, in the proposed East Antarctic MPA area.

For more information

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For more reading

Nature: [Plans rejected for East Antarctic marine park](#)

The Conversation: [Why are talks over an East Antarctic marine park still deadlocked?](#)

CCAMLR: [A proposal for a Marine Protected Area in the East Antarctic planning domain](#)

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