

How China came in from the cold to help set up Antarctica's vast new marine park

Conservationists have been celebrating the [creation of the world's largest marine park](#), covering 1.55 million square kilometres of the Ross Sea off Antarctica.

By [Nengye Liu](#) 2 Nov 2016



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The agreement, brokered at last week's annual meeting of the [Commission for the Conservation of Antarctic Marine Living Resources \(CCAMLR\)](#) in Hobart, will enter into force on December 1, 2017 – thanks in large part to China ending its resistance to the proposal.

For the next 35 years, fishing will be totally banned in a “no-take zone” covering 1.12-million square kilometres (72%) of the marine park, with exceptions for krill and toothfish in specially designated research zones.

The marine park's creation follows years of often frustrating negotiations. The United States and New Zealand brought the idea to the 2012 CCAMLR meeting, but were met with concerns, particularly from Russia and China.

At the 2014 meeting, China set out the reasons for its opposition. Its delegates argued that the term “conservation” should balance protection and rational use of marine living resources; that marine parks should not be set up in the Southern Ocean without convincing data showing they will work; and that the CCAMLR has already adopted a wide range of successful conservation measures in the seas around Antarctica.

A year later, China once again looked set to block the issue, posing a series of questions about the proposed marine park. How could marine parks allow rational use of marine living resources? How could they facilitate scientific research? How would they be monitored and regulated, and how long would the protections last?

Nevertheless, China surprisingly supported the Ross Sea proposal at the end of the 2015 CCAMLR meeting, paving the way for this month's decision.

Why the turnaround from China's previous opposition? And what does this mean for its growing and changing influence on Antarctic diplomacy?

Global influence

There are three key reasons that explain China's shifting position. First, China is a latecomer to the current global ocean governance regime. When the [Antarctic Treaty](#) was signed in 1959, China was still relatively isolated from the international community. It was not until 1978 that it opened its doors to the world and engaged with the current international legal system and as such it had little influence on the 1982 [United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea](#).

It has taken time for China to develop the necessary diplomatic and scientific expertise to become comfortable in this space. As a historic rule-taker rather than rule-maker, its government may need to overcome a natural mistrust of many existing regimes.

This issue is not unique to marine parks. Such hesitation was also evident when China [joined the World Trade Organization in 2001](#) and when it started engaging with [UN climate change negotiations](#) in 1994. But China now uses the WTO dispute settlement body as frequently as other members, and [ratified the Paris climate agreement](#) at September's [G20 summit](#) which it hosted for the first time – another sign of its increasing diplomatic engagement.

Second, China became a party of the CCAMLR in 2007. As the world's second-largest economy and largest fishing nation, China has global fishing interests, including off Antarctica. Chinese Krill fishing in Antarctica has [grown significantly since 2009](#), reaching 54,300 tonnes in 2014. This partly explains China's concerns over proposed no-take zones.

There is, however, a deeper philosophical concern, which might be described as "anxiousness for commons". While China's Antarctic fishing interests account for only a very small share of its global catch, they are highly symbolic because Antarctic fishing showcases China's quest for freedom in the "global commons".

Third, the international community is currently developing a new global ocean governance regime. By coincidence, negotiations on the regulation of fishing in the Central Arctic Ocean and other international areas of the high seas have been going on at the same time as the discussions about the Ross Sea. In the Northeast Atlantic, the OSPAR has already established a network of high sea marine parks.

As a rising power, China would not be happy to face constraints or bans on its activities at a time when its rising status gives it access to places like the high seas, the ocean floor, the poles, and outer space. It would be a shame if China were to remain silent on those issues, and it probably won't – China's 13th Five Year Plan (2016-20) clearly says the nation would like to take a more active role in global ocean governance.

In the foreseeable future, we could possibly see China become more comfortable and active within the CCAMLR as well as the Antarctic Treaty System. Although generally being supportive, China would not keep silent. Rather, it would speak up more openly for its Antarctic interests, and have more intensive engagement with the Antarctic Treaty System.

One challenge for China would be how to enhance its capacity and expertise so as to provide high-quality proposals, which could not only pursue its own interests, but as an important global player, also help to make a concrete contribution to achieving sustainability in the Southern Ocean.

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