


COP26: Antarctic and Southern Ocean maritime protections chance for instant climate credibility'

By JACQUELIN MAGNAY, LONDON

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World leaders could claim immediate “credibility” for commitments at the COP26 climate conference in Glasgow by agreeing to major maritime protection areas promoted by Australia in Antarctica and the Southern Ocean, international activists say.

Antarctic and Southern Ocean Coalition campaigner Mike Walker said only two countries – Russia and China – had yet to agree to the large scale maritime protections in the East Antarctic and the Weddell Sea, which had been first proposed four years ago.

The maritime protections are not on the intergovernmental COP26 agenda, which is focusing on reducing carbon emissions and financial boosts from G20 countries, but Mr Walker said the COP26 participating countries would be looking for a symbolic win.

He said the Glasgow conference was a chance for world leaders such as Prime Minister Scott Morrison, French president Emmanuel Macron, outgoing German chancellor Angela Merkel and US president Joe Biden to encourage sideline conversations with Russian president Vladimir Putin and make the calls to Beijing to produce an immediate and tangible result to show the world their future intentions on climate issues.

“The Southern Ocean and Antarctic maritime parks would be a low-hanging opportunity for the 26 member countries of the Commission for the Conservation of Antarctic Living Marine Resources (CCAMLR) most of which are G20 nations, to demonstrate actions and credibility,” Mr Waddell said.

“In addition to saying we will do things by 2030 here is an immediate demonstration of taking action.”

Australia, in conjunction with France, proposed the maritime protection in East Antarctica, a 0.95 million km² area which has since been backed by the European Union, Norway, Uruguay, United Kingdom and the United States.

Australia has also supported protections in the Weddell Sea, a 2.18 million km² area. A third has since been proposed for the Antarctic Peninsular by Argentina and Chile.

Last month Environment Minister Sussan Ley headed a social media video to illustrate the extensive political support from at least 18 different countries for the Southern Ocean maritime protections.

She said “Australia is committed to working with nations to develop a representative system of maritime protection areas to conserve the unique values of the Southern Ocean”.

Ms Ley also welcomed Australia’s new \$520m icebreaker, RSV Nuyina into Hobart this week, saying it showed Australia’s Antarctic commitment, ongoing ambition and determination to preserve the values in the Antarctic Treaty.

While Australia’s relations with China are fragile, campaigners point out how the original Antarctic Treaty was ratified 60 years ago in 1961 when the world was consumed by the failed Bay of Pigs invasion and the Berlin Crisis that led to the erection of the Berlin Wall.

At a recent high-level Antarctic event in Madrid, the US President’s Special Envoy on Climate, John Kerry highlighted the science was “unequivocal” and there was currently diplomatic “ripeness” to make progress on the maritime protections.

This year the issue of the Southern Ocean has been raised by both Mr Macron and Mrs Merkel in discussions with China president Xi Jinping while the EU has been discussing it with Moscow.

The Pew Trusts said the waters of the Southern Ocean were vital to the health of the planet by “producing strong upwelling currents that carry critical nutrients north of the equator and, in concert with the rest of the ocean, play a role in regulating the climate”.

The trust said this region around Antarctica is home to thousands of species found nowhere else such as colossal squid and fish with antifreeze proteins in their blood, to bioluminescent worms and brilliantly hued starfish.

Then there are the Southern Ocean predators such as penguins, seals and whales and the bottom of the food chain, the Antarctic krill.

This week, the 26 countries of CCAMLR are meeting online about issues facing Antarctica, hosted out of Hobart by Dr Jakob Granit of Sweden.

Mr Walker said the timing of the end of the CCAMLR meeting meant the Southern Ocean issue was front of mind of many countries when they then looked to engage with others at the COP26.

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