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Statement from: Claire Christian, Executive Director, Antarctic and Southern Ocean Coalition
Theme: Managing, protecting, conserving and restoring marine and coastal ecosystems

In 2020, the Antarctic and Southern Ocean Coalition (ASOC), like many other organizations, was looking forward to celebrating a “Super Year for the Oceans”. Of course, the global pandemic interrupted those plans. We are therefore pleased that the United Nations Oceans Conference has been able to take place this year to help us refocus global attention on how to protect the ocean, one of the planet’s most important life support systems. Many countries will no doubt make ambitious commitments and pledges at these meetings.

However, it is important to recall that while we do need new initiatives to better safeguard the marine environment, there are many existing commitments that have not yet been fulfilled. One of these is the commitment by the Commission for the Conservation of Antarctic Marine Living Resources (CCAMLR) to create a representative system of marine protected areas (MPAs) in the Southern Ocean. To date, only two CCAMLR MPAs have been designated, in the Ross Sea and the South Orkney Islands.

The urgency of fulfilling this promise is clear. The polar regions are experiencing rapid climate change, at the same time that there is increasing pressure from human activities. Though Antarctic species are adapted to tough conditions, they are vulnerable to human disturbance. Nevertheless, although whaling, sealing and fishing in the 19th and 20th centuries pushed some species to collapse or near extinction, scientists have shown that Antarctica’s marine ecosystems are still some of the least disturbed on the planet. Moreover, the Southern Ocean is a critical part of the global ocean, circulating life-giving nutrients to other ecosystems and regulating the planet’s temperature.

Thus we have a golden opportunity to learn from our past mistakes and protect Antarctica’s ocean proactively, preserving this great wilderness and all its magnificent species for future generations. The science is unambiguous: strict protection of at least 30% of the world’s oceans has the best chance of meeting global conservation targets, including the preservation of our planet’s incredible marine diversity.

And the countries that govern the Southern Ocean are ready. They have compiled decades of scientific information into compelling cases for new Antarctic MPAs in the Weddell Sea, East Antarctica, and the Antarctic Peninsula. Designating all three of these proposed MPAs would be the largest act of nature protection in history, and send an unambiguous signal that world leaders are taking their obligation to protect the marine environment seriously.

However, CCAMLR has not been able to agree these MPAs. There continue to be disagreements about whether there is enough science, or whether there is enough accommodation for fishing. These are arguments that should be left in the past. The world is facing an overwhelming

environmental crisis. We cannot address this crisis unless we abandon the idea that the burden of proof is on those who wish to protect nature, rather than on those who wish to exploit it. We have already done this once in Antarctica with the adoption of the Madrid Protocol, which banned mining and minerals extraction. The negotiators of that agreement had the vision and courage to set aside short-term interests in service of protecting our last untouched continent for future generations.

We must reignite that same spirit of leadership today, in the Southern Ocean and around the world. People are tired of hearing empty words and promises on environmental issues. They want their governments to show that they are serious about reversing the disastrous trends that have put our oceans at dire risk from a multitude of threats – from climate change to pollution to overfishing.

Thus, we call on all CCAMLR Member states to make the fulfillment of their commitment to designate a system of representative MPAs their highest priority in the coming months and years. There is no more time for delay. We cannot leave the fate of the Southern Ocean, which is nearly 10% of the global ocean, to chance. To secure the best possible future for all the penguins, giant squid, glass sponges and other unique species that call the Antarctic home, and for ourselves, we need to act now.

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