



Great British Oceans Briefing - South Sandwich Islands

Foreign and Commonwealth Office - 29th January 2018

The South Sandwich Islands proposal represents an opportunity to create a 500,000 km² reserve in a globally significant biodiversity hotspot. It can be fully protected by the UK without having any tangible impact on any CCAMLR member and within the existing UK budget allocated for delivery of the Blue Belt policy.

Protecting the world's ocean is a global challenge which requires global leadership. The UK has committed to conserve the ocean through international agreements. Political and public appetite for ambitious action has never been stronger. By protecting the South Sandwich Islands the UK and SGSSI Governments can meet their goals to deliver the "global gold standard on environmental protection" and in doing so can drive the regional and global agenda.

SGSSI could represent a template for wider global management of the ocean: fully protecting outstanding environments (e.g. the South Sandwich Islands), in parallel to driving the highest possible standards in sustainable fisheries management (e.g. around South Georgia).

Great British Oceans' (GBO) proposal

The United Kingdom and South Georgia and South Sandwich Islands (SGSSI) Governments create a fully protected marine reserve around the South Sandwich Islands (SSI), banning all commercial exploitation in an area of over 500,000km² - twice the size of the UK.

GBO is open to exploring the retention of a scientifically credible stock assessment of toothfish (currently limited to two boats operating one month a year in 2% of the SSI EEZ). It is our view that, if feasible, the UK should promote non-lethal means of assessing the toothfish population inside the protected area.

Why protect the South Sandwich Islands?

This is a globally significant, near pristine environment which hosts nearly half of the world's chinstrap penguin population (1.3 million breeding pairs), as well as globally significant populations of seals and whales. The SSI maritime zone contains unique deep-sea hydrothermal vent ecosystems, the 8km deep SSI trench, as well as seamounts not yet fully explored. The nine islands also span the range for Antarctic sea ice, uniquely positioning SSI across a bio-geographic boundary which could provide crucial science on the impacts of climate change.

The SSI are not commercially fished - 97% of SGSSI Government fisheries revenues are derived from South Georgia waters. No krill fishing has taken place in SSI waters for over 25 years, largely due to the fact that krill do not aggregate. A small research fishing effort is undertaken for toothfish for approximately one month per year.

The UK is in the position to fully protect the SSI marine zone. Although the waters fall within the CCAMLR management area, the UK designated a sustainable management Marine Protected Area (MPA) within SGSSI waters through domestic regulation in 2012 and could fully protect SSI through the same approach today.

Why now?

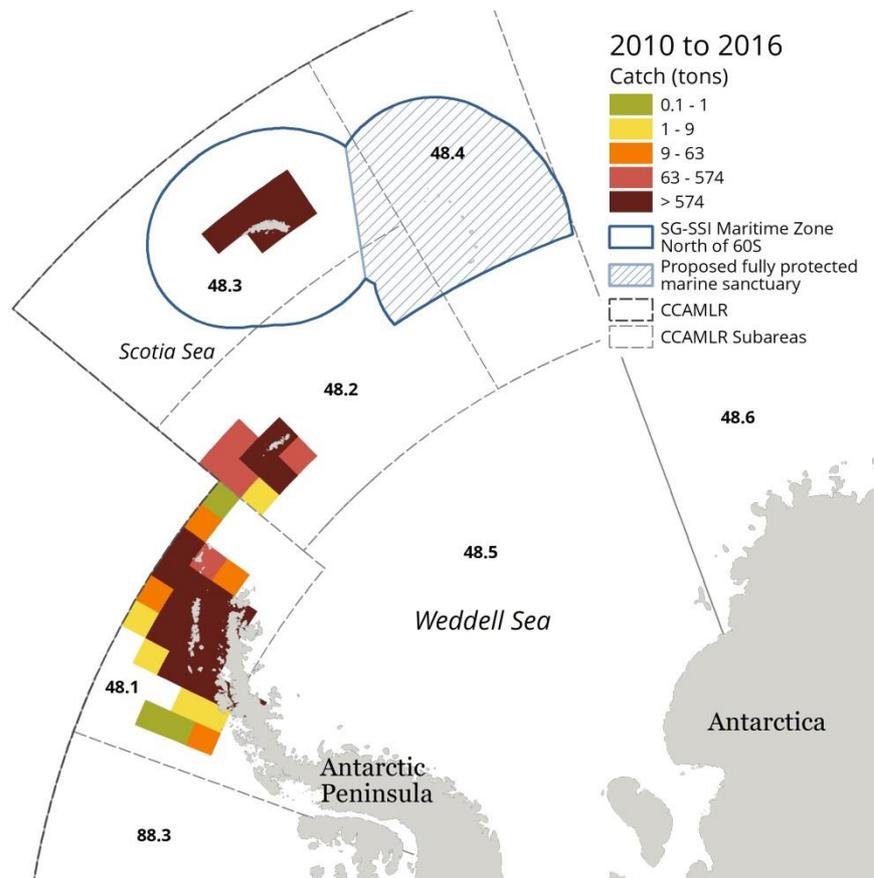
The Government of SGSSI scheduled a review of its MPA in 2018 to assess the efficacy of existing management measures. A highly protected MPA would formalise protection for the wildlife of these islands in an enduring contribution, re-affirming the UK's standing as a global leader in ocean conservation.

Concerns expressed

Displacement of krill fishing effort

SSI waters sit predominantly within CCAMLR management area 48.4. This area is allocated 15% of the CCAMLR krill quota (which totals 130% of TAC). The suggestion has been raised that the SSI designation will lead to this 15% quota being shifted to other areas – such as the Antarctic Peninsula. In response:

- Nobody has fished for krill in CCAMLR region 48.4 for over 25 years.



Krill catch in CCAMLR management areas (2010-2016) and SSI marine zone

- Regardless, GBO is not asking for the annulment of the 15% CCAMLR quota allocated to 48.4. GBO is calling for the UK to protect SSI's waters under domestic management measures (the same method used to originally designate the MPA in 2012), but to allow for the option to catch the 15% to remain in the 533,000 km² (56%) of 48.4 outside SSI.
- The wider krill catch allocations will be re-negotiated in CCAMLR in 2021. Closure of SSI prior to 2021 would not automatically lead to re-negotiation of krill catch - all CCAMLR members would need to agree to open this up to debate. In 2016, certain CCAMLR members pursued such a move, which was discounted by the CCAMLR Environmental Committee on grounds of sustainability. The same logic remains.
- It is understood that, regardless of any decision taken around SSI, some CCAMLR members will advocate to increase krill quotas in some regions during the 2021 negotiation.
- There therefore appears no immediate procedural means, or scientific rationale, for the closure of SSI to be used as justification to displace fishing effort.

UK decision makers need not miss the opportunity to protect 500,000km² of near pristine Antarctic environment today on account of technical dialogues on krill management in 2021.

UK influence over ongoing CCAMLR negotiations

It has been suggested that closure of SSI would undermine the UK's influence in CCAMLR on future decisions (e.g. related to new MPAs and the 2021 negotiation on wider krill management). Having consulted with a number of CCAMLR delegates, GBO has been advised that the UK's influence in CCAMLR derives predominantly from two factors:

1. **Issuance of fishing licenses in South Georgia waters.** This is economically significant to the Government of SGSSI, which in turn provides political latitude in CCAMLR negotiations and also allows the UK to demonstrate it is conservation minded when applying best practice fisheries management.
2. **Respected science.** The UK (BAS & CEFAs) is considered a leading voice, providing much of the research for active proposals, including the proposed CCAMLR MPA around the Antarctic Peninsula.

The GBO proposal would see all South Georgia fisheries licenses retained (97% of SGSSI fisheries revenues), having no tangible effect on any CCAMLR fishing interests, but continuing to signal the UK's intent to champion protections in the Southern Ocean. The basis of the UK's influence – providing science, and championing both high levels of protection and good fisheries management – would be unaffected.

There is precedent. In 2012, when first designating the SGSSI MPA, the UK closed actively fished toothfish grounds, changed the timeframes in which krill could be caught and demanded far higher technical standards/conservation measures of vessels operating within SGSSI waters. As such, the UK changed the domestic management requirements of fisheries within SGSSI waters within more than one million km² of CCAMLR waters. After this designation the UK's standing within CCAMLR remained strong. For example, the UK team was acknowledged as a key figure in the Ross Sea MPA designation in 2016. **What is being proposed here is far less impactful – protection of an area not fished for 25 years.**

What is the point?

The UK has committed to protect the ocean through international agreements such as the Convention on Biological Diversity and the Sustainable Development Goals. The Government is also in the process of executing its ambitious Blue Belt policy, through which the UK and its Overseas Territories have already taken significant steps to protect their waters and should be applauded as such. However, as custodian to the fifth largest marine estate in the world, the UK is in the privileged position to take a global leadership position in marine conservation.

Full protection of the South Sandwich Islands would safeguard a globally significant biodiversity hotspot, with no tangible impact on any CCAMLR member. The scientific justification for protecting SSI is grounded in the overwhelming evidence of the declining health, productivity and diversity of our ocean globally, and the critical role that fully protected areas can play in fostering recovery and safeguarding near pristine habitats.

In addition, SGSSI could be held up by the UK as a template for wider global management of the ocean: fully protecting outstanding environments with the greatest biodiversity (e.g. the South Sandwich Islands), in parallel to driving the highest possible standards in sustainable fisheries management (e.g. around South Georgia).

SSI provides an opportunity for the UK to be a catalyst for change and to set the agenda within CCAMLR and internationally on marine conservation. GBO encourages the UK to seize this opportunity.