



ANTARCTICA BELONGS TO ALL OF US. CAN WE CONTINUE TO TRUST THE FEW THAT DECIDE ITS FATE?

BY JUAN CARLOS MONTERREY-GÓMEZ

Panama is one of the few countries where whales migrate from the Northern and Southern hemispheres to breed. It's a haven where female humpbacks travel year after year to give birth to their young in our warm waters, before many migrate back to the icy waters of the Southern Ocean to feed.

After decades of whaling and exploitation, the presence of whales is a vital reminder of the ocean's ability to recover if we allow it the space to do so. They are a cornerstone of education and conservation for us, and one we work hard to protect. In 2014, we implemented a traffic separation scheme to minimise the overlap between whales and shipping lanes and force shorts to reduce their speed during the breeding season.

Panama acts with care and responsibility to ensure that when the whales visit Panama, they are safe. When they leave our waters, however, they leave our shelter.

When they enter the waters of the Southern Ocean, they fall under the protection of the Convention for the Conservation of Antarctic Marine Living Resources (CCAMLR). Here, 26 countries and the EU lead the decisions on the protection of the Southern Ocean and its wildlife, which encompasses not only whales but also penguins, seals, and seabird species. At the heart of my concern is a tiny crustacean, krill, which is the vital food source for the whales that migrate from our waters. If only it were the concern of the nations within CCAMLR that can vote on its conservation. Under the protection of CCAMLR, Antarctic krill fishing has reached record levels this year to feed farmed fish and to make omega-3 supplements. And yet, the industry and some countries want even more.

We must question whether the intentions of such nations are driven by their own commercial interest or to protect our wildlife and wild places. Only one is their mandate under CCAMLR.

For almost a decade, CCAMLR nations have flailed in a state of inertia, unable to find consensus to establish new marine protected areas (MPAs) and struggling to make any meaningful conservation progress in Antarctica.

Too long have a handful of nations held the power to protect Antarctica, and they have acted without the necessary ambition, responsibility or urgency, to adequately overcome the pressures of exploitation and climate change.

The Southern Ocean has the capacity to be one of our major assets in the fight against climate change. It regulates our global climate and drives our global ocean currents, which communities around the world have become dependent on. This couldn't be more urgent.

Antarctica is a global commons and much like the whales that we worked so hard to bring back from extinction, it will take the leadership of many to safeguard the Southern Ocean ecosystem and its wildlife.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Juan Carlos Monterrey-Gómez is a climate policy expert and international negotiator from Panama. As former Vice-Chair of the UNFCCC and Special Representative on Climate Change for Panama, he has led global efforts on carbon markets and climate transparency. Juan Carlos is as Obama Foundation Scholar and founder of Climate Resilient.

ANTARCTIC AVENGERS