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"Our Oceans, Our Responsibility"

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Thank you very much Professor, Legal Counsel and Staff and Director of DOALOS. I have been invited to speak on our oceans, our responsibility, and specifically on fisheries and on climate change and on behalf of the world's oceans today, World Oceans Day. Our oceans are crucial to life on Earth. They make Earth what it is. It is thought that life itself developed in a water environment and human life has its antecedents in the oceans. We can trace our cells back to the oceans through the saltiness of our tears, of our blood. Our heritage, our future is linked to the health of the oceans, thus our oceans, our responsibility.

The world's oceans cover over two-thirds of the Earth's surface and contain over ninety per cent of the world's biomass. This blue planet of ours is both fragile and resilient. The oceans serve as a reservoir, store and transmitter of heat and of water vapor; they regulate the Earth's climate and weather. The oceans absorb some of the carbon dioxide that we humans emit. The oceans provide over fifteen per cent of the protein needs of almost half of the world's population and almost twenty per cent of total animal protein in low-income food-deficient countries[2]. For many in developing countries, fish provide fifty per cent of dietary protein. Thus, healthy fisheries are critical to the food security of many millions of people. Fisheries also provide employment and economic opportunities in many countries, and are particularly important to helping to sustain coastal communities in developing countries.

The FAO in its biennial State of World Fisheries and Aquaculture Report (SOFIA Report) released in March 2009 noted that global trends over the last ten to fifteen years in the state of world marine fish stocks have been stable. In fact, moderately exploited and underexploited stocks decreased according to the SOFIA 2008 report from 23% to 20% while stocks identified as overexploited increased from 17% to 19% and depleted from 7% to 8%. Stocks identified as fully exploited remained at 52% and those identified as recovering from depletion remained unimproved at 1%.[3]

The FAO statistics that show relative stability relate to overall trends of stocks. However, the state of certain keystone stocks is much graver. Large predator species that act as critical regulators of ecosystems – tuna, sharks and others – have been greatly overfished. Scientists report that many such stocks have declined by 90% from historic

[1] The remarks given herein belong solely to the author and do not necessarily represent the views or policies of IUCN.
[2] SOFIA 2008 pp. 3-4
[3] SOFIA 2008 p. 30

levels. Bluefin tuna will essentially disappear from the Mediterranean in a few years if current rates of fishing are not immediately reduced. In other areas, the taking of large numbers of small prey fish is altering ecosystems. Large schools of menhaden together with oysters used to filter all of the water in the Chesapeake Bay every few days. That ecosystem has been altered to the detriment of marine and terrestrial life, including ours.

The FAO noted in presenting the SOFIA Report that only limited progress had been made in the implementation of sound management practices, that there was a need to reduce overcapacity in the fisheries sector, that Regional Fisheries Management Organizations (RFMOs) would need to be reinvigorated and become more effective, that there was a need to combat Illegal, Unreported and Unregulated (IUU) fishing, and that by-catch and discards had adverse consequences for fisheries and ecosystems. On the positive side, it was noted that there were a growing number of parties to the United Nations Fish Stocks Agreement and that there has been progress with respect of trade and subsidies issues within the World Trade Organization (WTO). However, it was also noted that climate change was modifying the distribution of fisheries and mitigation and adaptation was needed, that safety of fishers was an issue, that it was necessary to maintain marine biodiversity.

It is our responsibility, to the oceans, to ourselves and to our children to manage fisheries well. Under the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea we have accepted the obligation to protect and preserve the marine environment[4]. Coastal states, taking into account the best available scientific evidence are to ensure the proper conservation to protect living resources from over-exploitation, including with respect of effects on associated or dependent species.[5] In areas beyond national jurisdiction, states have an obligation to cooperate to conserve and manage living resources.[6]

We must move quickly to better manage fisheries if we are to have fish to eat tomorrow and if we hope to continue to rely on critical ecosystem services that the world's oceans provide to us and to other species. This is our responsibility.

Some key ideas to better manage fisheries include reducing fishing effort to that which is sustainable. We need to reduce fishing capacity, to reduce harmful subsidies. We need to implement ecosystem-based management whereby all species and activities are managed as a whole to the benefit of all. We need to apply strictly the precautionary approach. We need to protect the marine environment through the broadened use of marine protected areas including on the high seas and including marine reserves or no-take zones. Marine reserves will provide a refuge where fish, including larger female fish that produce exponentially more eggs, can shelter, thus ensuring healthier ecosystems and better harvests for future generations. We need to implement assessment processes and procedures also with respect of fisheries and to include assessment of cumulative impacts of human activities on the world's oceans. We need to better understand the science that drives nature through the more accurate and more transparent collection of data with

[4] See UNLCOS Art 192
[5] See UNCLOS Art 61
[6] See UNCLOS Art 118, also Art 119

respect of fishing. The Assessment of Assessments, that is the initial stage of a potential regular process under the United Nations for global reporting and assessment of the state of the marine environment, also represents an important mechanism to better manage our oceans.

Fishing is a human activity and it supports human life. We must look to ways to ensure that the poor and needy people of the world will continue to have access to protein from the world's oceans. This is our responsibility. We need to build capacity in developing countries, both to better manage fisheries resources and to help the poor to manage and use in a sustainable way these resources. We can do this through a variety of ways, for example by helping fisheries managers from developing countries to attend fisheries meetings, including those of RFMOs, or by helping developing countries to build capacity to better monitor, control, survey and enforce fisheries management laws and regulations in areas subject to their national jurisdiction or by adopting a good agreement on port-state measures to better enforce fisheries management.

We must work to reach the goals agreed at the World Summit on Sustainable Development in Johannesburg to create by 2012 a global and effectively managed system of marine and coastal protected areas and to maintain or restore stocks to levels that can produce the maximum sustainable yield with the aim of achieving these goals for depleted stocks on an urgent basis and where possible not later than 2015.

As was noted in the Millennium Development Goals Report in 2007, the world's fisheries are at particular risk, and require continued international cooperation and management to maintain current stocks and to allow depleted ones to recover. The Report noted that 40 per cent of the world's fisheries were considered sustainable in 1975 but only 22 per cent could be so considered in 2007.

Turning now to climate change, the effects on the world's oceans will be grave. Changes in water temperature, ocean chemistry (acidification) and ocean currents are already measurable and result from the build-up of greenhouse gases in the atmosphere. These changes are causing shifts in the availability and the quality of fish, thus potentially destabilizing the lives of fishers and coastal communities, many already vulnerable because of poverty and rural underdevelopment. As carbon is absorbed by ocean waters, those waters are becoming more acidic, thus threatening the stability and well-being of organisms that depend on calcium to build structures, including corals and shellfish.

Climate change threatens the welfare of our oceans and our coastal communities in other ways. The thermal mass of the oceans will expand as temperatures rise. Sea levels will also rise as land-based ice melts. Rising sea levels are already eroding shorelines in many areas. In Alaska, shrinkage of winter sea ice cover has allowed storms to erode coastlines, forcing some vulnerable communities to move. Acidification threatens to destroy coral reefs, which shelter to fish and other sea life and absorb wave energy. Sea level rise threatens mangroves, which filter water, shelter fish and other organisms and protect coastal communities. Sea-level rise threatens the very existence of low-lying island states.

Seventy science academies around the world recently released an Inter-Academy Panel on Ocean Acidification statement in which they stated that the acidification of the world's oceans, like climate change, is a direct consequence of increasing atmospheric carbon dioxide concentrations and that rapid and deep reductions in carbon dioxide emissions are the only solution. However, ocean acidification does not appear as a subject on the agenda of United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change talks.

The seventy scientific academies noted the critical role that the world's oceans play in the global carbon cycle and the rapid and irreversible changes that are taking place in ocean chemistry as a direct result. The oceans are now more acidic than they have been for 800,000 years. The statement calls for reductions of global carbon dioxide emissions by at least fifty per cent by 2050 with further cuts thereafter. The scientific leaders note the urgent need to act to reduce other stressors, including overfishing and pollution, on marine ecosystems in order to increase resilience to ocean acidification.[7]

I close by reiterating that it is our responsibility to our oceans, to ourselves, to our children and to other species with whom we share our planet Earth to restore our oceans to health. We must act responsibly to reach agreement this year in Copenhagen to reduce sharply our greenhouse gas emissions. We must act responsibly here at meetings in the United Nations, in the Food and Agriculture Organization and in regional fisheries management bodies to reduce our fishing effort to reflect and enforce sustainable levels of fishing. We must do this now.

Thank you.

[7] For additional information, see http://www.interacademies.net/Object.File/Master/9/075/Statement_RS1579_IAP_05.09final2.pdf