

OCEAN CONFERENCE HIGHLIGHTS: MONDAY, 5 JUNE 2017

The Ocean Conference opened on Monday, 5 June 2017. Plenary addressed organizational matters and heard statements from high-level Member State representatives and UN officials. In the afternoon, a partnership dialogue focused on addressing marine pollution.

CULTURAL OPENING CEREMONY

The conference opened with the “Kava Ceremony,” a traditional Fijian welcome, followed by a Life on Earth video on the ocean, narrated by Sir David Attenborough, outlining the benefits of, and threats faced by, the ocean, and opportunities to address them.

PLENARY

OPENING: António Guterres, UN Secretary-General, opened the conference. Plenary elected Josaia Voreqe (Frank) Bainimarama, Prime Minister of Fiji, and Isabella Lövin, Minister for International Development Cooperation and Climate and Deputy Prime Minister of Sweden, as Conference Co-Presidents.

Recalling the borderless nature of the ocean, Co-President Isabella Lövin thanked Fiji for its critical role in raising the ocean issue on the global agenda, and expressed hope for the conference to be the “game changer” the ocean needs. Co-President Frank Bainimarama highlighted the threats of climate change and ocean litter, declaring no government can afford to ignore the magnitude of such threats, and adding that greedy nations and commercial interests threaten livelihoods in SIDS.

UN Secretary-General António Guterres highlighted ways SDG 14 serves as a roadmap towards a clean ocean, including: ending the dichotomy between economic activities and ocean health; building strong partnerships and political leadership based on the existing legal framework, such as on MPAs and fisheries management; making new funding commitments; deepening our knowledge base; and sharing best practices.

Peter Thomson (Fiji), General Assembly President, considered the UN Ocean Conference the “best opportunity we will ever have to reverse the cycle of decline in which human activities have put the ocean”; pointed to IUU fishing and harmful fisheries subsidies as driving fish stocks to tipping points, in combination with climate change; and called for: “fidelity” to SDG 14 and the Paris Agreement on climate change.

Frederick Makamure Shava (Zimbabwe), President of the UN Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC), called for resilient infrastructure and sustainable industrialization, and holistic implementation of SDG 14 within the 2030 Agenda. Wu Hongbo,

Secretary-General of the conference and Under-Secretary-General in the UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs (DESA), emphasized the need for urgent and concrete action to save the ocean, as well as capacity building and enhanced financing.

ORGANIZATIONAL MATTERS: Delegates adopted the conference’s rules of procedure, agenda and organization of work (UN/Conf.230/1-3).

GENERAL DEBATE: President Evo Morales, Bolivia, stressed that to protect Mother Earth for future generations, the needs of landlocked states regarding fair and equitable access to, and sustainable use of, the ocean and its resources must be considered; called for a paradigm shift from unsustainable consumption and production to “buen vivir”; and highlighted his country’s intention to present a case against Chile at the International Court of Justice over access to the ocean.

Underscoring that development at all costs would “mortgage” the future of humankind, President Ali Bongo Ondimba, Gabon, highlighted designation of a 5,000 square-kilometer MPA, and establishment of a national council of the sea and an integrated marine strategy. President Peter Christian, Federated States of Micronesia (FSM), called upon US President Trump to do “what his country can afford to do” about climate change and the ocean.

President Baron Waqa, Nauru, highlighted agreement with neighboring countries on proactive measures for sustainable tuna management, and called for the conference to showcase the efficacy of multilateral action in addressing the interlinked challenges related to climate change and the ocean, including IUU fishing. President Robert Mugabe, Zimbabwe, urged ending IUU fishing, including through three regional fisheries monitoring and survey mechanisms for the Southern African, Eastern African and Indian Oceans, and concluding an international legally-binding instrument on BBNJ.

President Tommy Remengesau, Palau, lauded the science-based nature of Agenda 2030, urged countries to ratify the Port State Measures Agreement to combat IUU fishing and proposed establishing a “blue fund” for SDG 14 implementation. Enele Sosene Sopoaga, Prime Minister of Tuvalu, underscored the: inherent nexus approach of SDG 14; need to act on pollution from ships and shipwrecks, eliminate IUU fishing and set fish catch limits below the maximum sustainable yield; reduction of single-use plastic; and timely conclusion of the negotiations of an ILBI on BBNJ. Henry Puna, Prime Minister of Cook Islands, highlighted the closure of 60% of his country’s ocean space to commercial harvesting and reliance on renewables at 50%, with a target of 100% reliance by 2020; and urged addressing the disproportionate burden of responsible ocean stewardship and reinvigorating commitment to the fight against climate change.

Ranil Wickremesinghe, Prime Minister of Sri Lanka, called for a sustainable ocean economy bolstered by innovative public-private partnerships. Drawing attention to the challenges faced by SIDS, Mohamed Shainee, Minister of Fisheries and Agriculture, Maldives, for the Alliance of Small Island States (AOSIS), reiterated AOSIS' commitment to implement SDG 14, particularly by addressing marine pollution, ocean acidification and IUU fishing. Speaking for Maldives, he highlighted that the fisheries industry is set to phase out use of plastics, and collect marine debris throughout its exclusive economic zone (EEZ).

PARTNERSHIP DIALOGUE 1: ADDRESSING MARINE POLLUTION

Co-Chair Luhut Binsar Pandjaitan, Indonesia, delineated Indonesia's action plan on plastic and micro-plastic debris, aiming to: foster behavioral change; reduce land- and sea-based leakage; reduce plastic production and consumption; and enhance funding mechanisms and law enforcement. Co-Chair Vidar Helgesen, Norway, highlighted that marine litter threatens both the ecology and the economy of the ocean, and requires political attention; and pointed to Norway's recently-launched development programme to combat marine litter. Moderator Elliott Harris, UN Environment, referred to action taken in countries such as Canada, France, Kenya and Rwanda to reduce land-based sources of marine pollution, including by banning single-use plastic items and micro-plastics in cosmetics.

Nancy Wallace, National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, US, highlighted negative impacts of marine plastic pollution, including ingestion by fish and iconic marine species, and welcomed wider participation in the Global Partnership on Marine Litter. Kosi Latu, Director-General, Secretariat of the Pacific Regional Environment Programme (SPREP), highlighted adoption of the "Cleaner Pacific 2025: Pacific Regional Waste and Pollution Management Strategy 2016–2025," which addresses marine plastics as well as legacy issues such as oil leaks from old shipping vessels.

Peter Kershaw, Joint Group of Experts on the Scientific Aspects of Marine Environment (GESAMP), explained that sources of micro-plastics are personal care products, raw material plastic pellets and fragments of other plastics. Sybil Seitzinger, University of Victoria, Canada, outlined sources of nutrient loading and called for improved sewage treatment, better nutrient and manure management in agriculture and reduced fossil fuel combustion, noting that these measures produce co-benefits for other SDGs.

BELGIUM highlighted collective action and inter-disciplinary, multi-stakeholder collaboration, such as innovative products based on recycled ocean plastics and university research. FSM underscored the challenges of "big ocean states" and the need to control land-based sources of marine pollution. MALDIVES reported on: a regional approach to waste management; a national campaign and partnerships to reduce, intercept and recycle ocean plastics; and support for eco-innovative products.

CYPRUS emphasized the risks in enclosed and semi-enclosed seas. ROMANIA described eutrophication and nutrient-removal technologies in the Black Sea. The Helsinki Commission on the Protection of the Marine Environment of the Baltic Sea Area (HELCOM) reported on regional, cross-sectoral and multi-stakeholder cooperation implementing global standards on ship-based marine pollution.

JAMAICA highlighted cooperative initiatives on maritime energy efficiency, invasive alien species and ballast water management, and the need for political will, stable financial means and effective data collection systems to achieve the SDGs. IRELAND recalled that his country was the first to introduce a levy on plastic bags in 2002, and announced support for Sweden's initiative calling for a ban on microbeads, including in cleaning detergents and cosmetics.

The MARSHALL ISLANDS called for information sharing on violations, so as to adequately address repeat offenders; and underlined that the effectiveness of partnerships should be measured

in terms of implementation. ESTONIA called for a transition to a circular economy and pointed to a marine litter reduction action plan for ports and a regional aquaculture action plan.

UN Office for Project Services (UNOPS) shared examples of work in Sri Lanka and Bangladesh in developing solid waste management structures and integrated water resource management strategies. ITALY highlighted a Memorandum of Understanding with UN Environment on marine litter management, stressed the need to address underwater noise, and pointed to ongoing national discussions on banning micro-plastics.

PANAMA reiterated her country's commitment to UN Environment's Clean Seas global campaign on marine litter and the US Trash Free Waters initiative. The NETHERLANDS discussed the ban on plastic bags implemented in the island of Aruba and the development of the Caribbean's first waste-to-energy plant. The EU highlighted commitments to address micro-plastic leakage, develop clean up strategies in the circular economy, and invest in research on the relation between the ocean and human health. The STOCKHOLM INTERNATIONAL WATER INSTITUTE called for: capacity building of upstream communities to address downstream problems; and integrating marine pollution in sustainable production and consumption.

PERU described challenges from increasing pollution, and reported successes in efforts to improve water quality through coastal management approaches. TURKEY highlighted his country's marine litter action plan and commitments to price plastic bags, recycle 60% of packaging and 35% of recyclable waste, and a system for waste reception from small vessels. CHINA committed to, among other actions, comprehensive control of sewage treatment, including elimination of illegal sewage discharge points; and joint monitoring and technological research on marine debris, including micro-plastics.

UN ENVIRONMENT underscored: the link between marine pollution and several SDGs, and between land-based sources of marine pollution and development agendas; and the Global Programme of Action on land-based activities as the only intergovernmental mechanism addressing freshwater/marine linkages.

ALGERIA pointed to the: national programme for integrated management of household waste, land-based marine pollution policy, and ecological taxes. ISRAEL emphasized regional seas agreements, national laws to implement international commitments, and willingness to ensure compliance. HONDURAS reported an 80% increase in collection of marine debris from ships.

THE OCEAN CLEAN UP illustrated their technology to collect plastics in the ocean, noting potential spin-offs to detect plastics before they reach the ocean and encouraging collaboration based on the initiative's scientific data. WORLD ANIMAL PROTECTION stated that ghost fishing gear is responsible for 10% of global fish decline, pointing to the Global Ghost Gear Initiative and its contribution to the circular economy.

IN THE CORRIDORS

The UN Conference to Support the Implementation of SDG 14, dubbed the Ocean Conference, began on a high note, with many high-level representatives stressing its role as "game changer" and "last opportunity" to reverse the decline of global ocean health. As the outcome document, a "Call for Action," has already undergone lengthy intergovernmental negotiations in the months prior to the conference, some participants stressed that its formal adoption should not be the only measure of the conference's success. As one participant explained, "The Call is just a framework: the real work lies in the commitments that will be announced during the week." In that spirit, Gabon, Palau and the Cook Islands kicked off the showcase of commitments with ambitious initiatives on marine protected areas, renewables and pollution prevention. "So far, the smallest countries have set the bar quite high," one delegate noted. "It is now up to the larger and richer countries to follow suit."