

*Revised Statement: Alexandra Barron, National Director Ocean Program, Canadian Parks and Wilderness Society

Distinguished co-hosts and excellencies,

Thank you for your leadership in organizing the 2022 UN Ocean Conference and for the opportunity to provide comments to support the implementation of Sustainable Development Goal 14.

The Canadian Parks and Wilderness Society (CPAWS) is Canada's only charity dedicated to the protection of public land, freshwater and ocean working in a way that respects the sovereignty and leadership of Indigenous Nations. We were honoured to attend the UN Ocean Congress with Chief Councillor and Stewardship Director of Kitasoo/Xai'xais First Nation, Douglas Neasloss.

The research is clear: industrial use and overexploitation, coupled with the growing threat of climate change, are causing a rapid decline in biodiversity. As a result, we are facing a Nature Emergency that disproportionately impacts Indigenous Peoples and other marginalized and oppressed groups.

Marine protected areas (MPAs) are one of the most effective tools for rebuilding biodiversity, restoring ocean habitats, and helping species adapt to climate change — but only when they are well protected and well managed. Indigenous stewardship and Indigenous-led conservation provide an exceptional model for effective conservation – 80% of the world's biodiversity is found on land and ocean stewarded by Indigenous Peoples.

Over the past few years, Canada has significantly ramped up its efforts to protect the ocean, increasing from less than 1% of the ocean in MPAs in 2015 to 13.8% in MPAs and OECMs by 2019. Canada has also committed to establish minimum protection standards for MPAs and has recently joined a growing number of countries committing to protect 30% of the ocean by 2030.

We have a long way to go. According to a recent global assessment, less than 3% of the global ocean is in MPAs that have strong enough regulations and management to halt and reverse biodiversity loss. CPAWS' 2021 analysis of Canada's existing MPAs suggests that a similarly low percentage has strong enough protection measures in place to produce the ecological, social, economic, and cultural benefits that are both anticipated and needed.

But there is hope.

Indigenous Peoples and governments across Canada have consistently stepped forward with plans, initiatives, and actions to conserve and steward their traditional territories. The

Kitasoo/Xai'xais are one of 17 nations that have been working together with the federal and provincial governments to establish what will be a world class MPA network on Canada's west coast. In the face of a slow and frequently stalled planning process, and the urgent need for action, the Kitasoo/Xai'xais has declared a first-of-its-kind Marine Protected Area (MPA) for Gitdisdzu Lugyek (Kitasu Bay), a sacred area in the heart of their traditional territory. The new MPA was established with a world-leading management plan that is based in Indigenous laws and local knowledge and will be permanently and effectively monitored and managed by the Nation's Guardian Watchmen who are out on the water every day as part of the Nation's ongoing active management of the Territory.

Healthy oceans are essential to life on earth. Effectively protecting marine and coastal ecosystems is critical to ensure the well-being of current and future generations. We are at a crossroads and must decide now what legacy we want to leave behind for our children. Urgent action is needed if we want to see healthy ecosystems, thriving fisheries, flourishing communities, and just and equitable coastal economies.

Initiatives like the Gitdisdzu Lugyek (Kitasu Bay) Indigenous MPA offer a significant opportunity for Canada to meet its commitments to both ocean protection and reconciliation with Indigenous Peoples, and the implementation of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP). CPAWS hopes to see this model widely implemented both across Canada and globally and to see Indigenous voices and leadership recognized and amplified to a greater degree at future meetings.

It is clear that quick and decisive action is possible and that ambitious conservation targets are achievable with strong political leadership, wise investment, and a clear vision. CPAWS calls on governments and delegates to follow Indigenous leaders and take urgent action in the best interests of our ocean and to join us at the 5th international Marine Protected Areas Congress (IMPAC5) in Vancouver in February 2023.

