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Dear Distinguished Chair, Heads of States, Ministers, Representatives, and Delegates,

First and foremost, we would like to thank the Governments of Portugal and Kenya for hosting this conference. We are the co-founders of Nature Now International (NNI), a youth-led nonprofit organization that works to engage young people in the protection of vulnerable ecosystems through research, educational outreach, and advocacy. Our mission is to sensitize and motivate young people to continue to promote environmental justice and science using their unique backgrounds and talents, in whatever lifestyle, community, or career path they choose. We present the following statement to highlight the importance of the inclusion of young voices in the protection of the ocean, as well as the need for ocean science for data-driven management of ocean ecosystems.

According to the UN Environment Programme, *“we must invest in promoting actions by youth, as this will enable us to build the momentum to address the challenges of tomorrow.”* Young people have a personal stake in the future of the planet and endless potential when it comes to channeling our sense of urgency, creativity, and collaboration to come up with solutions that address ocean issues from the local to global levels. Young people should be given the opportunity to harness their skills and passions for addressing ocean issues from a wide range of perspectives and disciplines. For example, with the right tools and training, **youth** and local stakeholders can act as “citizen scientists” in order to carry out research, collect data for the protection of the ocean and endangered species, and help promote sustainable economic activities, such as ecotourism. Students should also be exposed to career development opportunities that combine personal development and environmental sustainability and are also relevant to their communities, such as ecotourism.

Additionally, through Nature Now International’s work supporting local efforts to protect sea turtles, coral reefs, and mangroves in Costa Rica, we urge world leaders to increase investment in ocean-based solutions for climate change. With the decisive decade for climate action well underway, we cannot keep turning our backs on one of the most crucial climate solutions: the ocean. It should come as no surprise that the ocean, which makes up approximately 70% of the Earth’s surface, plays a powerful role in the global climate. The ocean absorbs most of the heat radiated from the sun and helps to distribute it around the globe. About 48% of the carbon emitted to the atmosphere by the burning of fossil fuels is taken up by the ocean. In order to fully harness the power of the ocean as a carbon sink, we must invest in ocean-based solutions while continuing to mitigate the effects of climate change that threaten vital marine ecosystems and the communities that depend on them. Blue carbon, such as mangroves, salt marshes, and seagrasses, can store more carbon than many of their terrestrial counterparts.



In addition to curbing emissions and “keeping 1.5 alive,” investing in the ocean as a climate solution and lifeline for coastal communities means protecting marine resources, reducing current ocean stressors such as overfishing, reducing future stressors including deep-sea mining, restoring ecosystems, and investing in science that will shed light on the ways in which the ocean system can be best employed in the fight against climate change.

Ocean-based solutions depend on achieving the targets of SDG14 (Life Below Water) of the 2030 Agenda, which would promote healthy ocean ecosystems. Investment in ocean science is necessary to protect and restore the integrity of ocean ecosystems. Through a scientific and human-centered approach that engages the next generation of ocean leaders, we can harness the potential of marine ecosystems for carbon sequestration, coastal resilience, and supporting livelihoods. Ocean stakeholders must be engaged in ocean conservation, science, and policy in order to identify inclusive solutions that address the world’s most urgent needs.

Thank you for your attention. We hope the leaders of the world will address the current ocean crisis with urgency to ensure the survival of ocean ecosystems and the people who depend on them.