

**East Asia Marine Cooperation Platform Qingdao Forum**  
**Keynote Speech by Ambassador Peter Thomson, UNSG's Special Envoy for the Ocean,**  
**Qingdao, China, 28 June 2023**

**Improving Humanity's Relationship with Nature and Progressing Towards SDG14's Attainment**

Excellencies,  
Ladies and Gentlemen.

All courtesies observed, warm greetings to all present and many thanks to the organisers for bringing us together. My special thanks to the Ministry of Natural Resources, to the Shandong Provincial People's Government and to the Qingdao Municipal People's Government for hosting us at the Forum.

It has long been an ambition of mine to visit Qingdao, given its status as one of the world's pre-eminent centres of Ocean Science and Ocean Action; and I greatly look forward to visiting and speaking at the Ocean University of China in Qingdao tomorrow.

What an encouraging time of Ocean Action we have been experiencing recently. We can now take so much hope from the consensual conclusion of a run of multilateral agreements aimed at improving our relationship with nature and progressing towards SDG14's ultimate attainment.

After twenty years of negotiation, this month the High Seas Treaty was adopted at the United Nations in New York. This international legally binding instrument under UNCLOS, known by the acronym BBNJ, covers the conservation and sustainable use of marine biological diversity of areas beyond national jurisdiction. As Secretary-General Guterres said on the day of the adoption, "The adoption of this agreement demonstrates the strength of multilateralism, building on the legacy of the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea." He said that by acting to counter threats to our planet that go beyond national boundaries, "we are demonstrating that global threats deserve global action."

The High Seas Treaty provides massive support for the attainment of SDG14 and the Kunming-Montreal Global Framework for Biodiversity. Amongst other provisions, the treaty provides for the conservation and sustainable use of marine BBNJ; for benefit-sharing of marine genetic resources; for area-based management tools, including marine protected areas; for environmental impact assessments; and capacity-building and the transfer of marine technology.

Sixty national signatures of ratification are required to bring the treaty into force, so the race is now on to ratify as early as possible, so that we may begin implementing the provisions of the treaty for the betterment of the ocean's health and thereby our own.

Last December, as the culmination of the Kunming-Montreal process, we adopted the Global Biodiversity Framework. In our bid to restore balance to humanity's relationship with Nature, this was a huge step forward, and I must once more congratulate China's

Environment Minister Huang Runqiu for his wise leadership of the process. With its commitment to effectively conserve and manage 30% of the planet's land and sea by 2030, the Global Biodiversity Framework represents the best tool we have to fix our broken relationship with Nature and avoid a predicted cascade of species extinctions.

Meanwhile, at the beginning of this month in Paris, the Intergovernmental Negotiating Committee gave the go ahead to its Chair for the production of a draft text for the much-desired Plastic Pollution Treaty. This decision signifies solid progress as the draft will be the basis for the committee's next meeting scheduled for later this year in Nairobi. We have put a plague of plastic pollution upon the natural environment, with credible estimation there will be more plastic in the ocean than fish if we continue our errant ways, thus this treaty is a central element of our bid to attain an ecological civilization

At the WTO Ministerial Meeting last year in Geneva, we witnessed a major step forward in ocean sustainability when consensus agreement was reached to end harmful fisheries subsidies that contribute to IUU fishing. Two thirds of WTO Parties have to deposit their instruments of national acceptance with WTO for this agreement to come into force and we are currently well short of this number. Thus we must intensify international ratification efforts, for until the agreement enters into force, expenditure will continue of billions of dollars of public funds on fishing fleets engaged in IUU fishing. Meanwhile in fulfilment of SDG14.6, negotiations are underway in Geneva to conclude the second half of the harmful fisheries subsidies agreement, namely that of ending subsidies supporting overcapacity.

It is estimated that one in five fish sold in the world is illegally caught. That estimate still astounds me, for who would want to be a receiver of stolen goods? Who would want to see a coastal community deprived of what is lawfully theirs? Who would want to steal from Mother Nature? I put it that way because IUU fishing is one of the main reasons we are fishing global stocks at 34% beyond their biologically sustainable levels. The good news is that FAO's Port State Measures Agreement has entered into force. PSMA, as this agreement is known, is the most cost-effective means we have devised to end IUU fishing. With Mexico becoming a PSMA party last week, the number of signatory countries has grown to one hundred and two. The Pacific Rim is now almost completely ringed by PSMA parties. Once China becomes a party, I believe we will be able to effectively bring an end IUU fishing in the Pacific Ocean.

We can say that we have successfully completed the first lap on these agreements, with some still in the second lap running towards ratification, and others moving into the third lap of implementation. Implementation, implementation, implementation – without implementation of these agreements, we are still stuck in a whirlpool of decline. This is the reason that wherever I speak around the world, my main message is that when we gather at the next UN Ocean Conference in Nice in June 2025, the effective implementation of all these environmental agreements must be well underway.

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Arising from decisions taken at the UNFCCC COP26 in Glasgow, the Ocean and Climate Change Dialogue has been incorporated as an annual element of the UNFCCC process. This is of course as it should be on a planet whose climate is fundamentally influenced by the sun and the ocean, with the Dialogue covering ocean conditions resulting from climate change and anthropogenic greenhouse gases.

Earlier this month I participated in the Ocean and Climate Dialogue at UNFCCC headquarters in Bonn. In its current format, the Dialogue has appointed co-facilitators who serve for two-year terms, are responsible for co-chairing the Dialogue and guide the selection of the two topics to be discussed at each annual meeting. The two topics selected for this year's dialogue were ecosystem restoration, with blue carbon included, along with a second topic of fisheries and aquaculture, aquatic foods and related food security. The discussion around these two topics in Bonn was rich and meaningful, and it was clear by the end of discussions that the Ocean and Climate Change Dialogue has established a useful role for itself in the world's response to Climate Change.

The co-facilitators consulted widely with the global ocean community before selecting the two topics just mentioned. They subsequently issued an information note highlighting other deep concerns expressed by the community. First amongst these was unlocking and strengthening finance and addressing the climate-ocean financing gaps. There was also a broad call for greater attention on optimizing institutional connections across international policy processes and support, as well as across UN and other international agendas, including integrating ocean issues across UNFCCC processes. This was an important point, because the UNFCCC COP26 mandate gave the secretariat all the leeway it needs to bring ocean considerations across its workstreams. Finally, there was a strong call for the engagement and inclusion of indigenous peoples, local communities, women and youth in decision-making, protecting livelihoods and governance across the board.

It was the general view of the Dialogue that these concerns must find their way into the Global Stocktake at UNFCCC's COP28 in Dubai in five months' time, and that as things stand they are adequately included. This puts the onus on all those involved in the political process between now and COP28 to find ways of reflecting them in the GST.

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Ladies and Gentlemen,

Change is a constant. We are all aware, through empirical and circumstantial evidence, that marine ecosystems are changing around us as the ocean warms, acidifies and deoxygenates; and in some cases, it seems that the resulting effects on our aquatic foods and economies will be extreme. We must all remain alive to the implications of steadily changing ocean realities resulting from anthropogenically-altered atmospheric conditions.

We are fortunate that the UN Decade of Ocean Science got underway in 2021, with levels of ocean seafloor mapping, oceanic observations and research occurring at unprecedented levels. I like to repeat the Ocean Decade's mantra of "the science we need for the ocean we want" for this is the motivation that led the UN General Assembly to unilaterally approve

the Ocean Decade. Humanity is facing enormous challenges in the twenty-first century and we must fashion our response to them on the basis of the best of science. Remarkably, when you consider that the ocean covers over 70% of the planet's surface and harbours the majority of the planet's life, at this point in human history our scientific knowledge of the ocean's properties is "drastically incomplete". That description is a quote from the State of the Ocean Report published by IOC-UNESCO last year.

The challenges we face are not insurmountable, but they will *involve* REQUIRE widespread changes to the way we interact with the ocean. For instance, back in 2018, the IPCC Special Report on the Impacts of 1.5 Degrees Warming stated that the impacts of climate change on the ocean are increasing risks to fisheries and aquaculture. Our reaction to that reality must be based on equity, on sustainability and on entering a better balance with Mother Nature.

That IPCC report also said that all models keeping global warming at 1.5 degrees required deployment of CDR (Carbon Dioxide Removal) at scale. In Bonn I participated in side-event organised by world authorities on CDR, during which it was plain that a good deal of the global conversation is now moving towards OCDR (Ocean-based CDR).

The risks and costs of OCDR are glaring and we remain very deficient in our global sharing of knowledge and decisions on this subject. For better or worse, CDR and OCDR will alter planetary conditions. I therefore see this as a matter for universal attention and can see nowhere better than the UN General Assembly for this attention to be applied.

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The more we advance the findings of ocean science, the more we learn of the massive natural processes of carbon sequestration that are underway beneath the waves. The diurnal migration of mesopelagic fish is a prime case in point, and in the cause of carbon sequestration alone, there is good logic in a global moratorium on fishing this resource. Given their reliance on a healthy marine ecosystem for a reliable future, I believe the fishing industry should take the lead in calling for this moratorium.

Under SDG14, the fishing industry is required to bring the world's rampant illegal fishing and overfishing under control. But the industry's responsibility goes beyond that, for as with the rest of humanity, enhancing carbon sequestration is a key requirement in mitigating global climate change.

In Montreal last December, under the leadership of China's Environment Minister Huang Runqiu, the international community came together as one with the adoption of the Global Biodiversity Framework. The commitment therein for us to restore and conserve 30% of the planet's land and sea by 2030 replaces previous dismay and decline with aspirations of hope and advancement. We have set ourselves a momentous task, for currently less than 10% of the ocean and coastal areas is protected, meaning we have just six years to protect a further 20%.

But given a continuation of the multilateral cooperation we have witnessed in the recent run of multilateral agreements aimed at improving our relationship with nature, I have no doubt we are up to successfully completing the 30% task. The advent of the High Seas Treaty gives us a mechanism for the establishment of marine protected areas in areas beyond national jurisdictions, which gives us one more reason to move quickly on the treaty's ratification and implementation.

In the waters off Antarctica, if we follow the 2016 example of establishing the Ross Sea marine protected area, we have ample opportunity to advance towards the 30% target. The Commission for the Conservation of Antarctic Marine Living Resources, known as CCAMLR, has for a number of years now been considering several proposals for ecologically significant marine protected areas to be instituted in Antarctic waters. In the wake of the Kunming-Montreal process's historic outcome, the time has come for lifting remaining objections to the establishment of these new Antarctic marine protected areas. An ailing ocean looks to CCAMLR for action on this front without delay.

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In conclusion, I hope to see many of you in Nice in the early weeks of June 2025. There we will gather for the third UN Ocean Conference to support the implementation of SDG14, our common goal of conserving and sustainably using the ocean's resources. I have recently visited Nice to confer with the Mayor and inspect the conference site, and I can assure you that we have an excellent venue for the conference.

Building upon the experience of the two previous UN Ocean Conferences, supported by the UN Secretariat and my office, the Conference's Advisory Committee has commenced its proceedings under the Co-chairmanship of the 2025 Conference co-hosts, Costa Rica and France. The co-hosts have decided to place special emphasis on Ocean Science and the financing of the Sustainable Blue Economy, with work well underway in both cases to hold special events on these subjects. It is also encouraging to observe the Communities of Ocean Action are being refreshed under UNDESA guidance and getting underway in preparation for the 2025 Conference.

In all these preparations, let us remember that at the second UN Ocean Conference, the central importance of the Sustainable Blue Economy was emphasised as the prime means of achieving the economic benefits sought from the 2030 Agenda, while at the same time safeguarding the natural environment within which our species, and all life, derives its security and well-being.

It has been a pleasure and a privilege to address you all this morning and I thank you for your attention.

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