

**Speech by Ambassador Peter Thomson, UNSG's Special Envoy for the Ocean, at the Ocean University of China, Qingdao, China, 29 June 2023.**

## **Achieving a Healthy Ocean through International Cooperation**

Thank you for the opportunity and the privilege of addressing you all today. It has long been an ambition of mine to visit Qingdao, particularly the Ocean University of China, given its status as a pre-eminent world centre of Ocean Science.

Earlier this year, I was invited by TIME magazine to contribute a guest article on the state of the ocean. I began the article by alerting readers to the fact that the Ocean's health is in deep trouble. I wrote that most people know about over-fishing and the harmful fisheries practices that are causing at least a third of the planet's fishstocks to be exploited beyond biologically sustainable levels. I also said I presumed readers knew about the unconscionable levels of pollution, in particular plastic pollution, that we dump into the Ocean. But my central point was that these are not the worst of it.

The Ocean is steadily warming, its levels of oxygen are falling, and it is becoming increasingly more acidic, making conditions for life below the waves ever harder. The common enemy of that trio of changes to the ocean's fundament is greenhouse gas emissions. And we all know by now, who has been creating those planet-warming greenhouse gases.

When you're a grandfather like me, and you find yourself caring more for the well-being of your grandchildren than your current creature comforts, you quickly conclude there's no time for feeble thoughts and idle behaviour on the predicament we face. The predicament? Let me sum it up like this.

We put together our best environmental scientists on the UN's Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, and after exhaustive global scientific collaboration, they reported back on what will occur as global warming moves from 1.5°Celsius above pre-industrial levels to 2°Celsius. What they reported was exacerbation of already observable planetary trends, such as worsening of extreme weather, rising sea levels, diminishing Arctic sea ice, and loss of biodiversity and ecosystems.

But here's the predicament. They also reported that when we go above 2° warming, we lose the planet's coral reefs, those great bunkers of biodiversity, the vast nurseries that foster life in the Ocean. Without them, we have no idea how the Ocean's biome will function, and indeed we have no clear idea on what such loss will mean for the planet's ecosystem as a whole. If you care about human security, you should care about that. But that's not the predicament.

The predicament is that, even knowing all we now do about climate change and its effects, at current levels of global commitments, the planet is still set on a devastating course towards just under 3° Celsius global warming. Not 1.5° or 2° above pre-industrial levels and all the misery those levels will bring upon humanity, but 3°. That is the predicament.

The key finding to take from that IPCC report is that it is still possible to meet 1.5°. But doing so will require deep emissions reductions and rapid, far-reaching, unprecedented changes in all aspects of society. Essentially, radical change of human production and consumption patterns is what's called for. It's a big ask, but change has always been a constant, so why not now, when the future of human security is on the line?

For the pragmatists willing to get on with the changes, the good news is that we have a plan to save life in the ocean. It's a complex one and there are no silver bullets, but it will succeed if people of all walks of life get behind it to ensure its faithful implementation. The plan requires the great majority of us to exercise fidelity to the Paris Climate Agreement, to the UN's 2030 Sustainable Development Agenda, and the broad mosaic of multilateral agreements supporting them. For the ocean, the UN's Sustainable Development Goal 14, setting out to conserve and sustainably use the ocean's resources, is central to the plan.

It's an easy thing to say, but action is required from everyone. Everyone of us has a stake in the Ocean's health: think only of the fact that the ocean produces half of the planet's oxygen. As individuals, we have choices to make. As government officials, waste collectors, business executives, scientists or students, we have influence, big and small, and our daily thoughts and actions can create the cumulative change required.

When it comes to the struggle to attain SDG14, my to-do list for action includes things like these. We have to put an immediate end to overfishing, illegal and

destructive fishing practices, and the harmful distortions of government fisheries subsidies. The latter go in the main to industrial fishing fleets out there chasing diminishing stocks of fish, assisted by subsidies of public funds amounting to over \$20 billion per annum. Working with the WTO, we can help end that distortion now, and then see that the public funds saved are spent on beneficial measures like assisting coastal communities and establishing and enforcing marine protected areas.

From homes to schools, shops and offices, from industries to governments, we need to combat marine pollution, particularly from the plastic that has permeated our world, along with other source-to-sea pollutants like excess nutrients and industrial chemicals. That should be a shared priority for anyone who cares about saving life in the ocean.

And we have to scale up ocean science, for though great achievements have been made in ocean science, we increasingly understand how little we actually know. The State of the Ocean report published by IOC-UNESCO last year said that our scientific knowledge of the ocean is “drastically incomplete.” In such circumstance, respect for the precautionary principle is more important than ever, and critical judgement must be exercised on whether we can afford to add new stressors to the ocean’s ecosystem when our knowledge is so patently inadequate. All of this, and much, much more, is work at hand for us all in delivering on the plan to save life in the ocean.

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 imposing a global moratorium on exploitation of this resource. Given their reliance on a healthy marine ecosystem for a reliable future, I believe the fishing industry should be amongst the leaders 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 wise 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 therein set ourselves a momentous task, for currently less than 10% of the world's ocean and coastal areas are 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 capable of 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 huge, ecologically significant, marine protected areas to be established 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 vital front without delay.

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 its adoption, 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.

Only sixty national signatures of ratification are required to bring the treaty into force, thus 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.

As already mentioned, in the culmination of the Kunming-Montreal process, last December 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 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 intergovernmental 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 in 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. So far only a third have done so, thus we must intensify international ratification efforts; for until the agreement enters into force, subsidies expenditure of billions of dollars of public funds will continue to be given to fishing fleets engaged in IUU fishing.

In this regard, it is hugely important that this week China officially notified WTO of its acceptance of the agreement. As I said in a press release yesterday, I hope China's action will now open the floodgates for other countries to confirm their acceptances to WTO.

Meanwhile in fulfilment of SDG14.6, it is heartening to know that 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.

Being born and brought up on a volcanic island in the South Pacific provided me with direct observation of the hydrologic cycle and first-hand experience of the inextricable link between ocean and climate. It was clearly evident, even to a youthful mind, how the ocean was driving our water cycle, weather, and climate; how it was responsible for delivering the gentle rain that greened our

fields, and how from time to time its powerful energy unleashed incredibly destructive storms.

It still amazes me that with it covering over 70% of the planetary surface, and with the majority of life on this planet harbored in the ocean, that so much of our economic and scientific endeavor has just ignored the ocean. Thankfully that has never been the case at the Ocean University of China and I salute you for that. Surely the time has come globally for us to give the ocean and the sustainable blue economy its rightful place at the centre of considerations for the future security of life on this planet. Always ruled by the principle of sustainability, we must find for humanity a relationship imbued with much greater respect for the ocean's resources and ecosystems.

In these times of looming Climate Crisis, the UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres has said that humanity has been waging a war against Nature and that it's time for us to make peace. What is clear to me now, is that the ocean's best interests must be fully represented at the peace table. Along with the energy of the sun, the ocean is the great regulator, thus we must give it the full respect it requires from us.

Arising from decisions taken at the UNFCCC COP26 in Glasgow, having long been excluded, the Ocean and Climate Change Dialogue has now been incorporated as an annual element of the UNFCCC process. 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 for guiding 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 the meeting that the Ocean and Climate Change Dialogue has established a useful role for itself in the world's response to the Climate Crisis.

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 not 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.

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 degrees of ocean seafloor mapping, oceanic observations and research occurring commensurately 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, to once more quote the State of the Ocean Report, "drastically incomplete".

The challenges we face are not insurmountable, but they will 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 the 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 an 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.

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 that the Communities of Ocean Action are being refreshed under UNDESA guidance and are getting underway in their preparations for the 2025 UN Ocean 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 today and I thank you for your attention.

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