

**Keynote address by Ambassador Peter Thomson, UNSG's Special Envoy for the Ocean,
6th Asia-Pacific Day for the Ocean,
ESCAP, Bangkok, 30 October 2023**

ESCAP Executive Secretary Armida Alisjahbana,
Excellencies,
Ladies and Gentlemen

Sincere thanks for this opportunity of speaking to you all in Bangkok today. It is both a privilege and a pleasure to be delivering these remarks at the 6th iteration of Asia-Pacific Day for the Ocean.

I've participated in the Asia-Pacific Ocean Days since the first one organized back in 2018 and I deeply appreciate the thought and commitment that the ESCAP Secretariat has put into organizing them as a regional input to the UN Decade of Ocean Science for Sustainable Development. In so saying, I applaud ESCAP's efforts to stay true to the spirit of SDG14, in close collaboration with UN agencies in the region, in particular with UNEP and UNDP, all working together to protect the ocean by cohosting this event.

I'm also delighted to observe the close collaboration evident this Asia-Pacific Ocean Day with COBSEA, the Coordinating Body on the Seas of East Asia. For those unfamiliar with COBSEA, it is one of eighteen Regional Seas Conventions and Action Plans that are active globally. UNEP's Regional Seas Programme serves as a marine beacon guiding inter-governmental collaboration through the stormy seas of climate change, biodiversity loss and pollution. Next year marks the 50th anniversary of the Regional Seas Programme, an occasion that will not go unheralded in the lead up to the third UN Ocean Conference in 2025.

From the very first UN Ocean Conference held in 2017, these conferences have valued inclusivity and diversity as their hallmarks. The ocean conferences exist to support the implementation of SDG14, and for SDG14 to succeed, cross-sectoral collaboration is essential, including civil society, academia, the private sector and the scientific community. And within those sectors, the role of qualified young people is absolutely critical as we seek the solutions they will be responsible for implementing on our voyage into a precarious future. It is thus gratifying to see so many young people present today.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

As the mantra goes, there can be no healthy planet without a healthy ocean, and the ocean's health is currently measurably in decline. That decline can be measured in the warming of the ocean, leading to fundamental changes in marine ecosystems, death of coral and rising sea levels. It can be measured in rates of overfishing and the unprecedented rates of ocean acidification. It can be measured by the accumulation of plastic detritus on our foreshores and the proliferation of microplastics, from the bloodstreams of our own bodies to every corner and depth of the ocean.

But we are now awake to the challenges and are determined to halt and reverse the decline. As we struggle through these times of great political discord, distrust and strife, it is remarkable that multilateralism continues to deliver heartening progress on the environmental front. From overcoming the plague of plastic pollution, to defeating global overfishing, to the establishment of planetary biodiversity protection, we are laying down the legal frameworks that will lead us to a sustainable way of life on this planet.

Starting at the World Trade Organisation we are ridding the world of harmful fisheries subsidies. This is no small matter, for every year some 20 to 30 billion dollars of public monies are spent on these subsidies, mainly for the enjoyment of the industrial fishing fleets depleting the ocean of its fish-stocks. WTO Members have done half the job by agreeing to ban subsidies that contribute to illegal fishing. At last count, this agreement has now garnered close to half of the ratifications required to bring the agreement into force. Meanwhile WTO Members are engaged in slow but steady progress in Geneva, looking to complete the job by agreeing to ban subsidies contributing to overcapacity of fishing fleets. Hopes remain strong that such agreement will be reached by the time of the WTO Ministerial Meeting in February.

My plea to all of you reporting back to your capitals after our dialogues today, is that you recommend prioritization of the national actions required in your countries to support successful outcomes at WTO. Achieve those outcomes and we will have ticked the box on SDG14.6.

Against all odds, the UN Environment Assembly has established an Intergovernmental Negotiating Committee to put in place an international legally-binding instrument to control planetary pollution by plastic. The so-

called Plastics Treaty now has a draft text that will be debated by the Intergovernmental Negotiating Treaty in Nairobi next month.

The way things have been going to date, parties are quietly confident that a treaty can be agreed to by the end of next year. The rub will come in how robust the treaty will be, and whether it ushers in a truly circular economy for plastics. In my view, the treaty should not just be a rationalization of the plastics industry and a curtailment of the pollution it has so flagrantly put upon the world. There is mention in the draft text of the development of nature-based alternatives to plastic, and I believe the treaty should lean heavily in the direction of developing, financing and scaling of these natural alternatives. The only truly circular economy is Nature itself.

Here in the Asia-Pacific region we have many river systems that are the conduits of the plastic, microplastic, paint particles, tyre particles, chemical and nutrient pollution that put such negative pressures on our marine ecosystems. I applaud all those in the region who have adopted the principles of source-to-sea or ridge-to-reef, and have put measures in place to curb these pollution flows and stop the worrying proliferation of marine dead zones.

Asia-Pacific Member States were prominent in bringing the BBNJ process to a successful conclusion in New York this year. This agreement has huge implications for equitable governance of the High Seas and once again, the call is for your governments to take the lead in ratifying the agreement so that a High Seas Treaty comes into force before we gather in Nice, France in June 2025 for the UN Ocean Conference.

In Montreal last December, the Kunming-Montreal process came to a triumphant conclusion when the Parties to the UN Convention on Biological Diversity, agreed upon the Global Biodiversity Framework. Amongst many encouraging provisions the framework provides us with a target to protect 30% of the planet by 2030, a target based upon scientific consensus that if we don't do so, we will face a cascading of species loss at a rate unseen since the days of the dinosaurs.

Combining the consensus of the Global Biodiversity Framework with the advent of a High Seas Treaty, the way forward opens to establishing great marine protected areas out in the ocean spaces beyond national jurisdictions. For example, in the Pacific there exist High Seas pockets bounded by the EEZs of Pacific Island countries that are ready-made MPAs. Protecting the transit of

migratory species through these pockets will be of obvious advantage to the EEZs of the Pacific Island countries to which the fish are heading.

In the face of steadily changing marine conditions and FAO's reporting of 34% of global fish-stocks being over-fished, an abundance of fish-stocks should never be taken for granted. Much work remains to be done to achieve the SDG14.4 target and we should be most grateful to the Government of the Solomon Islands that it has agreed to host a summit next year to address SDG14.4. Honiara is the home of the Forum Fisheries Agency and with 60% of the world's tuna being located in the South West Pacific, and that stock being amongst the best managed globally, the Solomon Islands is a most worthy location for the summit.

It is heartening to see the heightened attention that ocean action is now being given in the Asia-Pacific region. As a precursor to COP28 in Dubai, ESCAP adopted a resolution in May calling for acceleration of ocean-based climate action. The Pacific Islands Forum has endorsed the development of the 2050 Strategy for the Blue Pacific Continent, giving the ocean a central place in regional policies and frameworks. The role of Pacific Ocean Commissioner has now been established as a stand-alone post, with offices to be established in Palau. ASEAN recently adopted its Blue Economy Framework, envisaging the blue economy as the new engine for ASEAN's future economic growth, in line with ASEAN's Carbon Neutrality Strategy, and the ASEAN Regional Action Plan for Combating Marine Debris. Meanwhile, I look forward to speaking next week at the World Ocean Week in Xiamen China, next week, and again there at the East Asia Seas Congress in November next year.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

In conclusion, let us remind ourselves that our region is home to a majority of the world's coral reefs, and it must be said that in the face of global warming, one of the most alarming prospects we face is the demise of coral. Given the outsize role coral reefs play in planetary diversity, if only for the self-interest of humanity, we must do all we can to preserve them. Without doubt the most effective step we can take in their defence is curtailing our greenhouse gas emissions to levels that allow the 1.5 degrees target of the Paris Climate Agreement to be maintained. COP 28 in Dubai is looming, thus to all delegations attending, on coral's behalf I make the plea that you do all you can to keep global warming at 1.5, so that coral can remain alive.

Last month in New York, the High-Level Panel for a Sustainable Ocean Economy released its report “The Ocean as a Solution to Climate Change”. The report’s analysis found that full implementation of ocean-based climate solutions that are now ready for action, could reduce the emissions gap by up to 35% on a 1.5° pathway in 2050. The report found that reducing oil and gas consumption is critical to success in meeting global climate commitments and that stopping the expansion of offshore oil and gas extraction should go hand-in-hand with a demand-led phase-down of current production.

The sectors identified by the Ocean Panel’s report for investment action included marine conservation and restoration, ocean-based renewable energy, ocean-based transport, ocean-based tourism, and ocean-based food. I’m pleased to note that these sectors are a good fit with this afternoon’s discussions in our three interactive dialogues and look forward to many solution-oriented outcomes emerging.

In the name of intergenerational justice, I conclude my remarks today by asserting that we must make a massive pivot towards investment in the Sustainable Blue Economy. We must make that pivot as if our grandchildren’s lives depend on it, because for many of them, that may well be the case.

I thank you for your attention.
