

Keynote speech at Opening Ceremony, Xiamen International Ocean Forum of 2023 World Ocean Week, Xiamen, China, 9 November 2023, by Ambassador Peter Thomson, UNSG's Special Envoy for the Ocean.

Excellencies,
Ladies and Gentlemen

All courtesies observed and warm greetings to all present. I am greatly honoured to be speaking at the Xiamen International Ocean Forum today and thank the Ministry of Natural Resources of the People's Republic of China, the Xiamen Municipal People's Government, and Xiamen University for giving me the opportunity of addressing you all today.

This is my second visit to Xiamen. During my first visit in 2018, I participated in the World Ocean Week. During the Covid pandemic it was only possible for me to speak at the World Ocean Week virtually, so I'm very happy to be back here in person to exercise what is becoming a special bond with Xiamen.

On my previous visit I toured the Xiatanwei Mangrove Restoration Park, then under early development, and have since mentioned it many times in my speeches around the world as a great example of what can be done with mangrove restoration. I am delighted to be visiting the park again tomorrow.

My role as the Special Envoy of the UN Secretary-General is to lead global efforts to implement SDG14, the goal agreed to by all Member States of the United Nations back in 2015, to conserve and sustainably use the ocean's resources.

Central to the drive to implement SDG14 before it matures in 2030 is the succession of UN Ocean Conferences established to support SDG14. The first conference was held in New York in 2017, co-hosted by Sweden and Fiji, breaking new ground for international ocean action through its inclusivity and energy.

Eighteen months ago the world gathered in Lisbon, Portugal for the second UN Ocean Conference, co-hosted by Kenya and Portugal. With many thousands of attendees engaged, with workable solutions presented for most of the ocean's problems, with billions of dollars committed in support, and a robust political declaration adopted, we can be satisfied the Lisbon conference continued the positive wave of ocean action that had been sweeping around the planet since the first conference in 2017.

The wave arose higher at the beginning of 2022 in Nairobi when UN Environment Assembly Member States agreed to commence negotiations for an internationally binding treaty to control plastic pollution, a subject very close to the purpose of SDG14.1's pollution target. The Intergovernmental Negotiating Committee entrusted with producing the treaty by the end of 2024 is hard at work. It will be deliberating over a draft treaty text in Nairobi next week.

From Nairobi, the wave swept to Bonn where in June this year the efforts of years of advocacy were rewarded at the annual Ocean and Climate Change Dialogues with the ocean henceforth assuming its rightful place in UNFCCC deliberations. The co-facilitators of the Dialogues will present a report to the UNFCCC plenary when we get to Dubai at the end of this month drawing attention to the ocean's key role in the mitigation of global warming and the dire effects of climate change upon marine conditions.

From Bonn, the wave of positivity ran through to the World Trade Organization in Geneva. After twenty years of negotiations on the subject, WTO's Ministerial Council agreed to end harmful fisheries subsidies in a two-phase exercise. The first phase resulted in agreement to ban subsidies that contribute to IUU fishing, and national ratifications of that agreement are now rolling in at an encouraging rate. The second phase aims to agree upon a ban on subsidies that contribute to overcapacity, with slow but steady progress occurring in that direction. Hopes remain strong that the job will be done by the time of the WTO Ministerial Meeting in February.

Meanwhile, the Parties to the UN Convention on Biological Diversity (that's basically all of us), after a Covid-delayed Kunming-Montreal process, came to a remarkable international consensus in Montreal last December and adopted the Global Biodiversity Framework. The process was ably led by its Chinese presidency and resulted in the framework's quantum reset of humankind's relationship with Mother Nature. SDG14 is set to benefit hugely through the framework's target of protecting 30% of the planet by 2030.

And then, along with its other welcome provisions in favour of good governance of the High Seas, the recently adopted BBNJ Treaty (widely referred to as the High Seas Treaty) also gave a major boost to SDG14 and the Global Biodiversity Framework's 30% target, through its introduction of Area

Based Management Tools enabling the establishment of large Marine Protected Areas in the High Seas.

Meanwhile the SDG14.4 target still labours under the 34% over-fishing statistic reported by the Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) for assessed global fish-stocks. It is quite shocking to think that one in five fish are estimated to be caught illegally, representing theft from the legitimate resources of island and coastal states and from Mother Nature herself. But with every new signature of FAO's Port State Measures Agreement, we come one step closer to eliminating illegal fishing. Hopes are high that China will soon become a signatory.

The wave of ocean action will sweep on to UNFCCC's COP28 in Dubai this month, to the UN SIDS Conference in Antigua next April, and then to the UN Decade of Ocean Science conference, being held in Barcelona also in April next year, taking stock of the Ocean Science Decade at its midway point. From there it rolls on to a special High-Level Event on Ocean Action being held in Costa Rica in June 2024, and on thereafter to the third UN Ocean Conference in Nice in early June 2025.

Along the way, there are so many other wonderful ocean gatherings around the planet, including of course the World Ocean Week here in Xiamen, all part of the sweeping movement towards the Sustainable Blue Economy and a truly Marine Ecological Civilization. We are taking the tide while it serves.

The third UN Ocean Conference is being co-hosted by France and Costa Rica, and the co-hosts will be holding three special events in juxtaposition with the conference, the first focussing on ocean science, the second on financing the sustainable blue economy, and the third on rising sea levels and their impact on cities and coastal communities.

From the outset, I have seen the triennial UN Conferences as our moments of truth on the progress of SDG14's implementation. And as a result of their success to date, I have come to view them as vectors of consensus for improving humanity's relationship with the ocean.

All in all, I tip my hat to the international community for what it's done over the last two years to advance ocean action and get the frameworks in place for us to make peace with Nature. On the environmental front, multilateralism is working!

The call to action to those countries that have yet to ratify what we've agreed to is, "please do so without further delay". Only then can our agreements come into force, enabling us to then get on with the critical business of implementation. To all countries that I travel to these days, on behalf of the ocean, I give out the catch-cry, "Ratify and implement!"

Ladies and Gentlemen,

In September this year 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 by 2050. 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.

The report concluded 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 link between extraction of oil and gas, global warming and dying coral encapsulates one of the most tragic narratives of our times. The Asia-Pacific region is home to a majority of the world's coral reefs, and as a result 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 biodiversity, 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 defense of coral reefs is curtailing our greenhouse gas emissions to levels that allow the 1.5 degrees target of the Paris Climate Agreement to be maintained. In short, we must stop burning fossil fuels.

COP 28 in Dubai is looming at the end of this month. Thus to all delegations attending, on coral's behalf, the plea is that you do all you can to keep global

warming at 1.5 degrees, so that coral can remain alive, thereby protecting our own species too.

If any of what I've just said sounds like hyperbole to you, I respectfully ask you to consider that these are not ordinary times. Based upon the findings and reports of the best of our earth scientists and meteorologists, the UN Secretary-General, Antonio Guterres, has declared a red alert for humanity. Their forecasts show we are on track to a destination of around 3 degrees global warming within the lives of our grandchildren. That is an unacceptable world of plague, fire, famine, and ferocious storms.

At the UN Ocean Conference in Lisbon, those cataclysmic forecasts caused Secretary-General Guterres to deeply apologise to the youth of the world for the dystopian future our generation has been preparing for them, and promised that we will spend our remaining years working in partnership with the young people of the world to reject that forecasted future and take the alternative road to 1.5 degrees warming. He has since conveyed throughout the UN system, that henceforth youth must not be at the periphery of our meetings, they must be at the meeting table, helping to negotiate the future they will inherit. The call is to include suitably qualified young people at the decision tables, early career professionals from fields relevant to the subject at hand, sharing in decision-making on the best directions to take to their future.

Yes, hard choices and arduous work are now at hand. The freeway to 3 degrees down which we are still cruising is broad and smooth. We have grown used to it and are reluctant to leave its comforts in our lifetimes. But it is a highway to hell for our grandchildren. For so many of them, three degrees is not a world they can survive in.

But there is a turn-off ahead and the sign says, "To 1.5 Degrees". From everything we have learnt from our scientists, 1.5 is a place where they can abide with dignity, where they can live with theirs in security and happiness. But make no mistake, the road to 1.5 degrees will require of us many fundamental transitions in the way we live our lives, and in parts the road is narrow.

But the realities of our planetary responsibilities, and the absolute moral imperative of intergenerational justice, hopefully imbued with love, oblige us to take the diversion to 1.5 degrees; they oblige us to start living in better balance with the world, to stop making war on Nature, to make peace with it, and thereby to stop the decline in the ocean's health. That is not a throw-away line, it very doable. Thus, it is *vital*, in the word's truest sense of "necessary for life", that the international community does not squander the positive momentum for ocean action that is currently alive within the international community.

If we truly desire a healthy ocean and a healthy planet, we must take the tide while it serves. We must ride the great blue wave that I have described today, ride it to the fruition of SDG14's targets. And when it has run its course in the years ahead, let's ensure we'll be able to look back and know we did all that was required of us in our time to restore the ocean's health.

I thank you for your attention.