

Speech at 2023 WLA Zero Carbon Forum: Science Leads Blue Transformation, 7 November, by Ambassador Peter Thomson, UNSG's Special Envoy for the Ocean

Excellencies,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

All courtesies observed and respectful greetings to all present. My thanks go to the World Laureates Association, to Global Ocean Negative Carbon Emissions, to Shanghai Ocean University, and Xiamen University for giving me this opportunity to address you all.

UN diplomats are rightly criticized for our overuse of acronyms, but please allow me one that will recur throughout my remarks today: SDG14. The fourteenth Sustainable Development Goal, SDG14, sets out to conserve and sustainably use the ocean's resources, with targets covering subjects that include marine pollution, protection of marine ecosystems, ocean acidification and the ending of overfishing and harmful fisheries subsidies. It is a universal goal, formulated and agreed to by all Member States of the United Nations back in 2015, and it matures in 2030.

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 in the alarming 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 (WTO) 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 this symposium, 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 the SDG14.6 target.

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 Committee in Nairobi this 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.

As a solution to the plague of plastic pollution that we have put upon the planet, the treaty's efficacy will lie in how robust it proves to be, and whether it ushers in a truly circular economy for plastics. Ideally, the treaty will open the door to a better scientific and medical understanding of what the intrusion of nanoplastics into human metabolisms is actually doing to us.

It is the view of many that the treaty should be more than just a rationalization of the plastics industry, more than just a curtailment of its environmental pollution. There is mention in the treaty's draft text of the development of nature-based alternatives to plastic, this view calls for the treaty to 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 source-to-sea ethos, and have put measures in place to curb these pollution flows thereby ameliorating the worrying proliferation of marine dead zones.

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

Ladies and Gentlemen,

In Montreal last December, the Kunming-Montreal process came to a triumphant conclusion, when under the determined leadership of our Chinese President, 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 the BBNJ 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 Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZs) of Pacific Island Countries that are ready-made Marine Protected Areas. 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 as being over-fished, an abundance of oceanic fish-stocks should never be taken for granted. Much work remains to be done to achieve the SDG14.4 target relating to better fisheries management, thus we should be most grateful to the Government of the Solomon Islands that it has agreed to host a summit next July 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.

I hope it is clear to all from what I've just described that what's been done over the last two years to get the frameworks in place for us to make peace with Nature, demonstrates the positive power of multilateralism. 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 all 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 is, "Ratify and implement!"

Ladies and Gentlemen,

In New York last September, 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 the tragic story of our times. 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 outside 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 to curtail 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.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I will listen attentively to presentations on zero carbon today. I am the Co-Chair of the Friends of Ocean Action operating from a platform provided by the World Economic Forum, and we are focused on the fostering of Blue Carbon as a key deliverable. We will be promoting this nature-based approach to climate change mitigation at COP28 in Dubai later this month and at the WEF annual meeting at Davos in January, thus the scientific presentations being given will be of great interest to me.

I should also mention that the third UN Ocean Conference, to which I referred earlier, will have a strong scientific focus. The co-hosts of the conference, France and Costa Rica have decided to convene a Special Event on Ocean Science from 5 to 7 June 2025 in Nice during the week prior to the UN Ocean Conference itself. This ocean science forum will be a major gathering for ocean science and I commend it for inclusion in your forward planning.

I would also like to bring to your attention that in Barcelona next April, the mid-term review of the UN Decade of Ocean Science will be taking place. I have committed to attend this key event and recommend the Barcelona conference to all who have an interest in ocean science.

Given the deficit of current knowledge of the ocean's scientific properties, the UN General Assembly mandated the UN Decade of Ocean Science for Sustainable Development to get underway in 2021, giving the Intergovernmental Oceanographic Commission of UNESCO the task of leading us through the Decade – a task they have been fulfilling with great diligence.

In the years ahead, we will have some very important decisions to make about our relationship with this planet, and we will need to take those decisions on the basis of the most trustworthy and comprehensive scientific findings available. Consider that point, along with the fact that the planet is much more oceanic than terrestrial, and the vital place of the UN's Ocean Science Decade comes clearly into focus.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

To conclude, I leave you with the thought that the pressing realities of our planetary responsibilities, and the absolute moral imperative of intergenerational justice, hopefully imbued with love, oblige us to make the urgent transitions required to keep climate change within a 1.5 degrees limit. 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.

Stopping the decline is *vital* – using that word in its truest sense of “necessary for life”. It is vital that the international community does not squander the positive momentum for ocean action that is thankfully alive in the international community today.

A leave you with a final take-home thought - that we must make a massive pivot towards investment in Ocean Science and the Sustainable Blue Economy,

all in a nature-friendly world of truly circular economies. 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.