

"Catalyzing Source-to-Sea Synergies towards Healthy Rivers and a Healthy Ocean", Institut de Ciències del Mar, Barcelona, 9.30am, 9 April 2024, remarks by Ambassador Peter Thomson, UNSG's Special Envoy for the Ocean

Excellencies,

Ladies and Gentlemen

Many thanks to the organisers of this event and to you all for the opportunity to air some of my views at this early stage of a week we've all anticipated for so long. Three years and a bit into the UN Decade of Ocean Science for Sustainable Development, here in Barcelona we're going to jointly assess how ocean science has been faring to date, and what priorities we should be setting for the remainder of the Decade, if we're going to get the ocean science we need for the ocean we want. It is said that knowledge without action is wasteful and that action without knowledge is foolishness. And so, ocean scientists and ocean activists, let's make sure we're working hand in glove.

Two vast shadows loom over today's event. The first is that we live in the age of plastic. From the clothes we wear to the food we eat, plastic permeates our lives and the world at large. Cheap, pliable, durable, waterproof, its utility is indisputable. And yet, scientific studies are increasingly demonstrating that many thousands of chemicals used in the manufacture of plastics are hazardous to us and to wildlife, causing endocrine disruption, mutagenicity, carcinogenicity and more. Reminiscent of our past struggles with tobacco, we're now approaching a crossroads in our relationship with plastic, a crossroads at which we'll have to decide whether we value utility over the well-being of our children and Nature.

The second shadow is that of chemical pollution. Yes, we have a massive problem in the form of plastics pollution, but the problem of chemical pollution is just as pernicious, many would say more so. Nutrients like fertilisers, urban detritus and sewage, chemicals and pharmaceuticals, heavy metals, toxins and other hazardous materials from activities like waste management, agriculture, manufacturing and mining, are carried by run-off and rivers to accumulate in coastal waters and spread out into the wider ocean. The effects of this deluge of chemicals upon the ocean, and ultimately upon us, are poorly understood; but we need only look to the chronic neurological disorders caused by mercury in the famous events of Minamata to understand that dire consequences do arise from dumping harmful substances into the ocean.

I said these shadows loom over us, but of course they do more than loom - they surround us. The atmosphere, soil, our roads and buildings: all are permeated by them. Through the hydrological cycle *alone* everything is connected, and therein lies the rub that's brought us to this event: the ultimate dump for most of this pollution is the ocean.

Thanks to the exertions of the few, the many are waking up to pollution's threat to the well-being of humanity and Nature as a whole. Around the world ideas and efforts are advancing, and happily, imbued within them is the Source-to-Sea ethos. Some call it an approach or an

action plan, but I call it an ethos because like sustainability or intergenerational justice, thinking in Source-to-Sea terms is fundamental to maintaining a healthy relationship with the planet on which we live.

Along water's journey from precipitation, from percolation into groundwater, from surface runoffs into drains and creeks and rivers, there are multiple points at which the Source-to-Sea ethos can come into play. As a long-term collaborator with SIWI, I commend to all who've yet to familiarise themselves with the S2S Platform, the multistakeholder Action Platform for Source-to-Sea Management, that they do so by visiting SIWI's website.

The S2S Platform is a network of organisations committed to promoting, implementing and building expertise on source-to-sea management. It presents a broad range of tools, which is necessary because management kicks in at many levels: regional, national, sub-national and local levels. And it addresses barriers to comprehensive application of source-to-sea science, policy and practice, including inherent knowledge gaps. One of the most artificial of these divisions is that between the fresh water community and the ocean community, a division that is patently counter-intuitive to the hydrological cycle; so much so we can say with certainty that bringing SDG6 and SDG14 into closer harmony is a logical component of the Source-to-Sea ethos.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I've been allocated five minutes to speak, so I'll conclude now, but not without emphasising two points. The first being the importance of what Economist Impact and the Nippon Foundation are putting forward under their Back to Blue initiative. At the recent World Ocean Summit in Lisbon, they launched their roadmap for action for a global ocean free from the harmful impacts of pollution, notably from chemical pollution. Their aim is to produce a strategic framework to build an evidence base that will tackle ocean pollution collectively, and I recommend that you take a good look into whether you might be able to play a part in its progress.

The second point is the gravity of the Plastics Treaty currently being under multilateral negotiation. This is our chance, a once in a generation chance, to deal to the hazards attendant with the ills of plastic and its damaging chemicals. Scientists around the world who are true to the principles established by our internationally agreed environmental conventions, should be in the bear-pit shaping the policies of the national delegations negotiating the treaty, so that finally the rampant run of plastic chemicals can be brought to heel.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Thanks to SDG14.1, ocean pollution will be a major component of the work of the UN Ocean Conference in Nice in June next year. Between now and then we will have such High-Level Events as the Our Ocean Conference in Athens next week, the Commonwealth Ocean Ministers Meeting in Cyprus also next week, the SIDS Conference in Antigua in May, the Immersed in Change Conference in Costa Rica in June, and the CBD COP in Colombia in October. At all these gatherings and more, these two points will be highlighted, deliberated

upon, and pushed forward for translation into action by the outcomes of the UN Ocean Conference in Nice in June 2025. To SIWI, the OARS working group and all others involved, I say, let's make sure we're prepared to imbue the Nice Conference with the Source-to Sea ethos. I look forward to being part of that process with you all.

Thank you for your attention.
