

ICRI's Coral Reef Breakthrough Event, UN Ocean Decade Conference, 0830hrs, 11 April – Indian Ocean Room (127 – 128), CCIB, Barcelona. Closing Remarks by Ambassador Peter Thomson, UNSG's Special Envoy for the Ocean

Thank you to the organisers and to previous speakers for the opportunity of making final remarks at this morning's event. As you know, we meet on the thresh-hold of a possible fourth global mass coral bleaching event - more deeply troubling evidence of the threat posed to planetary biodiversity by climate change and global warming.

You've heard the facts on coral this morning from such an eminent group of speakers that I'm going to confine myself to some personal observations and then leave you with a couple of take-home challenges. But firstly, I've yet to say my daily mantra, so I'll say it now. There can be no healthy planet without a healthy ocean, and the ocean's health is currently measurably in decline. The corollary of that mantra is of course that halting and reversing the decline is the great task of our times, and in the context of this morning's event that means saving coral reefs, for who can imagine a healthy ocean devoid of coral when coral reefs support at least 25% of marine species.

Like many of you here this morning I was born and raised on a coral coast. Every one of Fiji's 350 islands is ringed by a coral shore-reef or barrier-reef, and every aspect of your day is influenced by those coral reefs: be it the protection they provide from ocean swells and storms; their provision of passages and harbours for local boats and ocean-going ships; gardens of biodiversity for locals and tourists to marvel at; bunkers of staple foods like fish, seaweeds, and shellfish; not forgetting the senses we live by and the beauty of waves curling along a reef break or the seeth and suck of reef's lullaby as you drift off to sleep. "*Rogoca na kere i cakau*," an old Fijian proverb goes. Referring to the sound of those waves upon the reef, the proverb means listen to the wisdom of those who have been before us.

I've been a diver for well over fifty years, free diving and then scuba diving, and apart from coral bleaching, two things have struck me with the passing of the decades. The first has been the sad decline of marine life on coral reefs, especially the disappearance of big fish. In my experience the decline has occurred through human population pressure and modern techniques of commercial fishermen, including the introduction of scuba, portable compressors, night-diving to spear sleeping fish, access to remote reefs by fast boats and the not-so-modern method of dynamiting. The second observation has been more joyful, which is witnessing how responsive marine life is to marine protected areas. As long as harmful external elements such as effluents and poaching are effectively controlled, life comes teeming back within fully protected areas, with flow-on benefits for adjoining unprotected areas. It is clear that where safe havens exist, marine life knows where to go for protection from man.

And so I leave you with the first of the take-home challenges. science tells us if we do not preserve 30% of the planet by 2030, we will lose vast swathes of the planet’s biodiversity, a loss which may well have existential consequences for homo sapiens. The Global Biodiversity Framework to which all nations committed in 2022, includes a target to preserve 30% of the planet’s land and sea by 2030. Since the ocean covers over 70% of Earth’s surface, how are we going to fast-track the selection and implementation of biodiversity-rich, climate-smart areas of the ocean to meet the 30 by 30 challenge on time, and ensure that coral reefs make up a large percentage of that 30 per cent? It seems to me that by the CBD COP in Colombia in October, we should be in a position to answer that question and act on our solutions.

The second take-home challenge relates to the prime cause of coral’s bleak future: the burning of fossil fuels, creating planet-altering greenhouse gas coverage, causing global warming, leading to untenable conditions for coral. My challenge to all of us fighting to preserve coral on Planet Earth is aimed at the courage of our convictions. In our own lifestyles, our communities and countries are we doing everything within our power to hasten the transition to carbon neutrality and a Nature-positive world. Are we doing everything we can to stop the burning of fossil fuels? For without addressing that prime cause of the threat to coral reefs, we are ignoring the whale in the room.

In closing, I offer congratulations to ICRI for its 30th Anniversary, with many thanks due to all who have and continue to give it support and service. I’m very encouraged to learn that ICRI, the Global Fund for Coral Reefs, CORDAP, and many others, will be hosting a ‘Reef Action Hub’ at the third UN Ocean Conference in Nice in June next year. I’d also like to urge wide support from the public and private sectors for the great work of the Global Fund for Coral Reefs as it goes through its current funding replenishment phase. And I call on all nations, organisations, and ocean practitioners to endorse and implement the Coral Reef Breakthrough with its clear call to action to secure the future of coral reefs.

Thank you for your attention, be ever hopeful and solution-oriented, and have a great day in Barcelona.
