

**FAO Committee on Fisheries, Thirty-Sixth Session (COFI36) – Closing Remarks  
by Ambassador Peter Thomson, UNSG’s Special Envoy for the Ocean, 12 July  
2024, Rome Italy**

Mr Chairman,  
Excellencies,  
Ladies and Gentlemen

Warm greetings to all present and thank you for the opportunity of addressing you today. Coming from Fiji, I feel at home whenever I’m immersed in a fisheries gathering. Be it related to harvesting or consumption, islanders have fishing in their blood, and as someone said to me during a recent visit to Iceland, “Fishing is the right thing to do, you just have to do it right!”

Through the privilege of making these remarks towards the closure of this year’s meeting of the Committee of Fisheries, I’m given the chance to congratulate you all on a successful session. Make no mistake, with record amounts of aquaculture production now in evidence, and projections for strong and sustained growth in the sector, your adoption this week of the Guidelines for Sustainable Aquaculture was a very important step. Aquaculture is fishing, so we have to do it right! Do it right, and there’s little doubt aquaculture will play a major role in the future of food security, nutrition, and livelihoods. Do it right, and aquaculture will be part of the solution to climate change and ecosystem degradation, not part of the problem.

Thanks to FAO’s Blue Transformation strategy, we have a roadmap that paves the way for sustainable growth in fisheries and aquaculture, promoting equitable benefits and reversing environmental degradation. But let us remember that in order to achieve sustainable fisheries and aquaculture, we must not only work collaboratively with those here in this international forum, but also with those outside it, including those looking after trade, infrastructure, safety and environment, as well as community and civil society organizations.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

When in Montreal in 2022 the community of nations consensually agreed to adopt the Global Biodiversity Framework, it recognised that nature and nature’s contributions to people are vital for human existence. Living in harmony with nature was recognised as being essential to our survival on this

planet, and to ensure that eventually, we included in the framework a target to protect 30% of the planet by 2030. We agreed to achieve this target by effectively conserving and managing, through ecologically-representative and equitably-governed systems of protected areas and other effective area-based conservation measures.

It goes without saying that marine and coastal areas are a crucial element of that 30% and that therefore this so-called 30 by 30 target should be high on the agenda of all ocean-related organisations. In considering what qualifies as “effective area-based conservation measures”, it is clear that meaningful interaction with RFMOs and UNEP’s Regional Seas Programme is required, and I am at pains to stress this point at all relevant meetings I attend this year.

One month ago, I was privileged to speak at the launch of the 2024 edition of SOFIA, the State of World Fisheries and Aquaculture report, when FAO presented it at the High-Level Event on Ocean Action in San Jose, Costa Rica. As I’m sure you know, this year’s SOFIA highlights the continued growth of fisheries and aquaculture production and the ever-increasing contribution of aquatic foods to global food security, nutrition and livelihoods.

In San José, FAO showed again how well-governed, science-based management continues to be the most effective approach to conserving aquatic resources. But the SOFIA launch also recognised that many stocks are still not fished within sustainable biological limits. We thus agreed that urgent action is needed to accelerate fishery stock conservation and rebuild over-exploited stock. We also agreed that we must better use our knowledge and science to implement evidence-based management in those fisheries where overexploitation persists.

Looking ahead to the third UN Ocean Conference in Nice, France, 9 to 13 June next year, we are called upon to demonstrate that we are keeping faith with SDG14’s implementation. In that regard, we must face the fact that over-fishing is just not right. Thus, from 24 to 27 February next year, with a view to improving on delivery of SDG14.4’s demands, the Government of the Solomon Islands is convening the Honiara Summit, in cooperation with FAO, the Forum Fisheries Agency, my office, and others. The summit is being structured to enable alignment of fisheries strategies and action across all relevant stakeholders, with the ambition of having all RFMOs present with us in Honiara.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I'd like to put on record my admiration and gratitude for the way in which FAO has been actively supporting Member States in their engagement with SDG14's implementation. This work has been above reproach and I look forward to FAO's contribution to the input and outcomes of the 3<sup>rd</sup> UN Ocean Conference next year.

I'd like to commend COFI Members for their attention this week to the intersections and synergies vital to fisheries and aquaculture policies and practices, along with the areas where additional resources or expertise are needed for successful implementation. This week's discussions at COFI36 have provided a highly valuable opportunity to air fisheries and aquaculture concerns in the build-up to next year's UN Ocean Conference.

And yes, we must be prepared to grasp the thorny issues still confronting us, including the negative impact of various foreign fisheries access arrangements on coastal communities and the biodiversity within their waters; including greater respect for the rights and needs of small-scale fishers; ensuring aquatic foods are ethically and responsibly sourced; and better combatting of IUU fishing through enhanced monitoring, control, and surveillance measures to ensure compliance with regulations.

We must finish the unfinished business, by signing and implementing PSMA, by ratifying the BBNJ treaty, by supporting an end to plastic pollution through agreement on a really robust Plastics Treaty, by supporting at CCAMLR the long-proposed marine protected areas for the Southern Ocean, and by joining the international consensus at the WTO to end harmful fisheries subsidies.

As you return to your capitals, please do what you can to ensure your country has ticked all these boxes before we convene at the UN Ocean Conference in a year's time. Let us recognise the big picture of the triple planetary crisis; let us bring it all together and get the job done on SDG14.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

In conclusion, it would be disingenuous of me to address you on ocean issues without mentioning the challenges humanity has created for itself by our continuing production of greenhouse gases and the consequent warming of the planet. Every year that passes, now witnesses the ocean breaking its temperature records. As a result, the scope of ocean issues requiring urgent

attention is daunting and we should not underestimate the enormity of what lies ahead. To cope with the changes that will be coming upon us, we'll be turning increasingly to the ocean for the solutions to our problems, be that in carbon sequestration, medicine, energy, food security or nutrition.

The fisheries and aquaculture sector will not be spared these challenges, but in the exercise of the best of science-based management, by sharing the results of research and innovation, and through enlightened international cooperation, we can be confident the sector will make a major contribution to the resilience we seek for those who will inherit the fruits of our labour.

It is said that action without knowledge is foolishness and that knowledge without action is wastefulness. We have the knowledge, so let's be wise what we do with it, and get on with the action required to achieve SDG14, our agreed goal of conserving and only sustainably using the ocean's resources.

My final words are to pay homage to FAO Deputy Director-General, Maria Helena Semedo, who will soon be retiring from FAO. Throughout the decades in which she's been a loyal servant of this organisation, she has garnered huge respect from all quarters and has become one of the most highly esteemed women globally within the UN system. Maria Helena, we salute you, thank you for your service and wish you well for the years ahead.

I thank you for your attention.

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