



Statement delivered by Honorable Minister Dr. Omar Figueroa, Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries, Forestry, the Environment, Sustainable Development & Climate Change to the United Nations Ocean Conference

6 June 2017, New York

Mr. Co-presidents,

On behalf of the Government and people of Belize, I wish to extend our congratulations to you for the initiative and leadership you have demonstrated to support the implementation of sustainable development goal 14.

For the first time since the adoption of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, we are jointly examining two agendas - the environmental and the development - that have long existed in parallel and that are better understood for their tension than for their synergies.

The 2030 Agenda compels us to abandon those conceptual silos and to forge integrated approaches for sustainable development.

As a first step, Belize considers it essential that we understand the magnitude of our challenges so that we can devise coordinated solutions to overcome them. And we must ensure that those solutions are underpinned by good science, good practices; and that they benefit all humankind.

Co-presidents,

The state of the world's ocean already reflects a narrative of the impacts of the present and the past. It tells largely of humanity's threat to one of its most vital resources. There is perhaps no certainty of how far and how deep those impacts are felt but there is no denying that the oceans are changing before our own eyes.

Not only are our oceans warming and driving the pace of climate variability and sea level rise, but they are also becoming saturated with carbon dioxide (CO₂). Ocean acidification is having untold impacts for life in the oceans and for small island developing states (SIDS) this is coupled with increasing risks of coastal acidification.

These changes in the ocean are fundamental changes for us. They are not mere environmental phenomena; they are a matter of people's lives, their property and essential infrastructure. **They are a matter of survival.**

Co-presidents,

The changes and the impacts upon the oceans are unequivocally consequences of our own action and their continued deterioration, a result of our inaction.

Yet, no one disputes the value of the world's ocean. We all are conscious that healthy oceans and seas are fundamental to human welfare and that they are an important part of the earth's life support system.

Our foremost challenge then is reconciling our own relationship with the oceans.

We cannot continue to impose fragmented solutions to what is essentially one massive ecosystem. We need a more holistic ecosystem based approach to oceans sustainability.

Belize's experience with its small scale fisheries is a testament to the value of this approach. We utilize a combination of tools including integrated coastal zone management, marine protected areas, traditional and indigenous approaches, and co-management involving local stakeholders.

Belize boasts an extensive network of marine protected areas that amounts to **21 percent** of our coastal and marine areas. This is a tremendous accomplishment considering that only one third of the 232 marine ecoregions [worldwide] have attained or surpassed the global benchmark target of 10 percent. And we are committed to increase the **percentage of no-take zones by a further 10 percent** before 2020.

Belize is also the **only country in the world** to have developed a national multi-species system of marine tenure and zoning, locally known as managed access. This system has proven reliable as a tool to empower traditional fishers to protect their fishing area.

One of the challenges to ecosystem based management is the availability of analytic and scientific tools for its implementation. Here again, Belize is working on an international scientific partnership to use a data-limited approach for setting harvest controls on catch that will prevent and reverse overfishing. This innovative approach will establish Belize as a **proof of concept for the science-based management of small-scale fisheries**.

Finally, Co-presidents, the importance of **effective governance** from the local up to the global cannot be understated.

Strong institutions and legal frameworks are a fundamental pillar to Belize's approach to marine conservation and fisheries management. But our national actions alone are not enough.

We rely on existing global and regional frameworks and arrangements to reinforce our national efforts. For Caribbean SIDS, strengthening our regional indigenous institutions with better science and stronger institutional capacity is therefore a priority.

At the global level, we need a more coherent governance framework. And we need to ensure that it is comprehensive including for marine biological diversity of areas beyond national jurisdiction.

Together these global and regional arrangements if rationalized, connected and strengthened could provide a working global ocean governance framework that will enable conservation and sustainable use.

Co-presidents,

Belize is committed to being a responsible steward of the world's ocean.

We have fully embraced SDG 14 and are well on track to meeting the targets of that goal. And, we will not stop there. Belize has registered voluntary commitments that will take us beyond those targets.

We look forward to partnering and leading in the implementation of SDG 14. For the sake of our people, we can ill afford to do less.

I thank you for your attention.