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**NGO Statement by GFDD/Funglode**

**The high-level United Nations Conference to Support the Implementation of Sustainable Development Goal 14: Conserve and sustainably use the oceans, seas and marine resources for sustainable development (June 5-9, 2017)**

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Thank you, Mr/Mme Chair.

Excellencies,

Oceans, along with coastal and marine resources, play an essential role in human well-being and social and economic development worldwide. They are crucial for people living in coastal communities, providing livelihoods and tourism benefits, as well as subsistence and income.

Within the Caribbean region whale watching is a billion-dollar industry, practiced in more than 87 different countries and territories worldwide, attracting over nine million participants per year. The Caribbean Sea itself covers 970,000 square miles and includes some of the deepest parts of the Atlantic Ocean, offering a diverse range of marine habitats to over 30 cetacean species. It is not surprising, therefore, that the region provides considerable opportunities for the development of whale watching.

Today, along with the Bahamas, the Dominican Republic stands as one the pioneers of the whale watching industry, with a flourishing eco-tourist economy, thanks in part to the creation of the Silver Bank Humpback Whale Marine Sanctuary in 1986 by Mr. Oswaldo Vasquez, an Advisor to the Center of Environment and Natural Resources of our foundation GFDD in Santo Domingo.

In addition to the economic benefits, whale watching has also proved to offer major community benefits in the form of educational gains for local schools and colleges and a sense of pride that develops within whale watching communities. Islands that adopt a conservation policy around their whale watching industry have reported even greater gains through the appreciation and awareness of marine conservation and a platform for cetacean scientific research.

To unveil the connection and potential synergies between conservation, human well-being and economic development, our latest research study on this issue “Resident Perceptions of Whale Watching in the Dominican Republic” has shed light on the social and environmental sustainability of whale watching, looking at the balance of perceived costs and benefits in the community. We highlight a general need for proper management system for the whale watching industry, one that helps conserve the cetaceans that the industry relies on, while educating the members of the local community and ensuring the industry remains economically beneficial to them. Tackling these hurdles, our study findings have helped to confirm that the Dominican whale watching industry has supported conservation and community economic development, and could therefore serve as a role model for other countries with similar industries.

As we officially launch our report at the United Nations this afternoon, we hope that its focus on the sustainability of this industry will encourage a strong debate on the merits of the blue economy and support the implementation of SDG14 as it relates to the sustainable use and conservation of marine resources.

Thank you Mr/Madam Chair.