

Statement by Barbara Visser, Minister of Infrastructure and Water Management of the Netherlands, at the OSPAR ministerial meeting, Cascais (Portugal), 1 October 2021

Mr Chair, Commissioner, ladies and gentlemen,

- I'm sure we're all grateful to be able to meet each other in person today at this beautiful, historic location – the Palácio da Cidadela in Cascais.
- The COVID pandemic has had a terrible impact. And it's not yet over. But the fact that we're able to meet as a group means we're starting to put this dark episode behind us.
- There are plenty of reasons why I feel very at home at this gathering today: I grew up in a seaside town in Croatia and now live by a river near the Dutch coast. And in my previous role as state secretary for defence I worked with the Dutch navy, with people who feel as passionately about the sea as they do about peacebuilding.
- This conference comes not a moment too soon. Because the challenges we face are enormous. Climate change is one of the biggest crises of our time. The necessary transition from fossil fuels to renewable energy is leading to more offshore wind farms, which means more intensive use of our seas and coastal waters. At the same time we need to preserve biodiversity and ensure scope remains for economic activities like shipping and fisheries.
- Finding a balance between key themes as the climate crisis, biodiversity loss and economic opportunities will be our main challenge in the years ahead.
- With that in mind, I'd like to quote Jacques Cousteau, the famous French ocean explorer and filmmaker: 'The sea, the great unifier, is man's only hope. Now, as never before, the old phrase has a literal meaning: we are all in the same boat.'

- In short, now is the time to decide, within OSPAR, on a new strategy for 2030. Setting out the ambitions and targets over the next 10 years for a clean, healthy and biologically diverse North-East Atlantic. Now is the time to decide we want an ocean that's productive, sustainably managed and resilient to the effects of climate change. Now is the time to focus on achieving the UN Sustainable Development Goals for 2030, and to present our work as a Regional Sea Convention at next year's UN Ocean Conference. Let's all put our weight behind this strategy and make it happen together.
- The new strategy should be aligned with the action we're already taking on land. This means, for instance, balancing the energy transition with nature restoration and a viable future for North Sea fisheries. This requires a long-term, practical and intensive programme that carefully weighs the many different interests – shipping, defence and sand extraction, to name but a few.
- Other actions must be aimed at tackling pollution at the source. For instance, by making agreements with sectors about reducing the use of plastic packaging and increasing recycling. But we also need to talk to the fisheries and shipping sectors about reducing marine litter, including remnants of fishing nets. These measures all tie in closely with the OSPAR Regional Action Plan for Marine Litter and the EU's Zero Pollution Action Plan.
- We need sustainable energy to tackle climate change, but not at the expense of ecosystems. That's why we're also taking measures regarding offshore activities like wind farms. Measures aimed at reducing underwater noise from wind turbines, for instance, and clearer rules for seismic research.
- The protection and conservation of our oceans is by definition an international matter. Marine ecosystems extend across national boundaries. 'Our' North Sea also belongs to other countries. That's why we are working together closely with our neighbours and within OSPAR to improve the marine environment. Cooperation with EU and non-EU countries is vital for us. Simply because you can achieve more, and do so more effectively and efficiently, when you work together. So cooperation remains key.

- You only need to look at the fact that the North Sea still hasn't achieved 'Good Environmental Status', despite our international efforts. I see the North-East Atlantic Environment Strategy 2030 as a key step to achieving that goal.
- The Netherlands has also taken the initiative to explore the scope for closer cooperation with other countries in the Greater North Sea. To see if that can help us achieve our common and national goals in areas like ecology, energy and a sustainable blue economy.
- In short, you won't be surprised to hear that, in the years ahead, our country will continue working within OSPAR in pursuit of our common goals. So I hope that we will make good progress today on agreeing a North-East Atlantic Environment Strategy 2030.
- Mr Serrão Santos, I consider it an honour to work on these challenging goals today with you and all the other government ministers and representatives. And I'm optimistic. Because people around the world cherish the beauty of our oceans and marine life. To quote Jacques Cousteau again: 'We love what we marvel at, and we protect what we love.'
- Thank you.