

Dear Excellencies, dear colleagues, dear delegates,

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On behalf of Mr. Van Quickenborne, Vice-Prime minister, Minister of Justice and North Sea, I, have the honour to represent Belgium at this unique event.

For almost 40 years, OSPAR has been a unique partnership between partners around the North-East Atlantic. Belgium has always supported the workings of OSPAR and today we continue to give it our full backing because the protection of the marine environment is under more pressure than ever. At the beginning of the COVID 19-crisis it was often said that what we are going through now is only a foretaste of the consequences that climate change will bring us. OSPAR is proactively taking a leadership role and is thus an essential element in providing a response to the climate and biodiversity crisis. Today we have the opportunity to deepen our OSPAR cooperation even further and to set up an ambitious strategy to better protect the environment of the North-East Atlantic.

Seas and oceans are an important buffer against climate change. The creation and development of a network of marine protected areas is one of the main pillars in this strategy. And this is not only about quantity but also about quality, which Belgium, together with other Blue Leaders represented here, is focusing on: not just protect 30% on paper, but set up a network of fully and highly protected areas. For each area that is or has been designated, there must be a sufficiently high level of protection to safeguard the existing ecosystems. This responsibility lies with each of us. To this end, Belgium wants to commit to a scientifically based Environmental Impact Assessment and Strategic Environmental Assessment. These mechanisms exist, but we need to apply them properly, on the basis of a shared understanding between all States involved. In addition to this protection, we will also have to work on the creation of nature and the active recovery of species and habitats that are unable to recover naturally. In Belgium, we will soon be taking our first steps in this direction and we will reach out to take advantage of the knowledge and experience which some members of OSPAR have already developed.

We are also very pleased to see progress in the new NEAES 2030 strategy in areas where less knowledge and policies have been developed. For example the impact of underwater noise where few mitigation measures have been undertaken until now. Some parts of the North-East Atlantic are amongst the loudest seas in the world. The impact of noise on marine life is not quantified. We consider OSPAR in its regional setting as one of the most appropriate bodies to test initiatives to reduce underwater noise for shipping industry. While negotiations on underwater noise are ongoing within IMO, this is a key moment to try and evaluate mitigation measures. Belgium has conducted studies that show that there is potential to reduce both underwater noise and emissions from ships, so I see no reason not to pursue this further. By working at OSPAR level, we will be able to maintain the level playing field in this region, which is important for shipping. Together we can achieve this ambition.

The members of OSPAR can and must take a leading role, including at global level, to address the climate and biodiversity crisis. It is our collective responsibility to act for future generations. The potential is great and the time to act is now. The upcoming COP on Climate and on Biodiversity that soon will start in Glasgow, UK and Kunming, China are important key moments to really turn the tide. As one of the Blue Leaders, we will work here to ensure that 30% of the oceans are highly and fully protected by 2030. We are counting on you, not only today but also in the weeks and months to come to strive together for better and effective protection of the marine environment. I thank you.

Majto obrigado. E boa sorte !