

OSPAR Ministerial Meeting, Cascais, Portugal, 1 October 2021

Address by the Minister for the Environment and Natural Resources of Iceland, Mr. Guðmundur Ingi Guðbrandsson

Ministers, distinguished delegates, dear friends,

OSPAR Ministerial meetings are few and far between, and they provide an occasion to look back, and more importantly, ahead.

Looking back, I think OSPAR has a lot to be proud of. Robust monitoring, state-of-the-art assessments and a host of decisions and recommendations to halt pollution and support a healthy marine environment. OSPAR has a science-based and practical approach to the protection and sustainable use of the marine environment. We can point to many positive developments, such as reduction in many pollutants, that can in part be credited to OSPAR decisions. In short: OSPAR works.

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Just a few days ago my Ministry published a report on pollution and acidification in Icelandic waters, on the occasion of this Ministerial. For most pollutants, the story was a positive one. Icelandic waters are relatively clean, and many pollutants are decreasing. This is not an inevitable trend. Much of the credit for success in this field goes to scientists who spot threats, activists who push for measures and organizations – such as OSPAR – that coordinate a practical response.

The report also shows reasons for concern. Plastic debris is found on remote Icelandic coasts, and in seabirds. Ocean acidification is occurring in Icelandic waters as elsewhere. Some of the most rapid acidification observed anywhere occurs in the sea north of Iceland. These threats demand a response.

I applaud our ambitious targets to reduce plastic pollution in the new North-East Atlantic Environment Strategy, which we are about to adopt. OSPAR is a crucial instrument for this, by its work in monitoring and analyzing marine debris and microplastics and by recommending actions to stem the flow of plastics that foul our seas. But we also need a global agreement to counter plastic pollution. I think OSPAR can help us push for such a global instrument.

The greatest threat to marine biodiversity is climate change and its manifold impacts. This includes ocean acidification, which is a grave threat to marine ecosystems. I welcome OSPAR work in this area, including the work of its expert group on ocean acidification and our voluntary commitment to

the UN Sustainable Development Goals. We should not lose our sight, however, on the fact that the only way to prevent catastrophe for marine life due to acidification and climate change is to halt global carbon emissions. We must deliver in Glasgow to support our agenda here in Cascais.

Iceland welcomes the new and ambitious strategy for OSPAR, that we are about to adopt. It builds on the strengths of OSPAR and offers new and ambitious goals on issues like plastic pollution and marine protected areas, including other effective conservation measures. Iceland supports the 30% goal for protected areas in the sea in 2030, as set out in our declaration and strategy.

Iceland also applauds the adoption of the NACES protected area for seabirds, a first of its kind on the open seas. Many birds that nest in Iceland feed in the NACES area; we need to look at the big picture in protecting seabirds and other migratory species.

Iceland is committed to support the work of OSPAR and strengthening our work in pollution prevention and conservation of marine biodiversity. Iceland is unusual among OSPAR Member States, because of the fact that fisheries are a cornerstone of Iceland's economy. Our economic and social wellbeing is dependent on a healthy marine ecosystem and the sustainable use of living marine resources. We live close to the sea, and our lives and fortunes are intertwined with the ocean and its bounty. OSPAR has a collective arrangement with the North-East Atlantic Fisheries Commission, which builds bridges and further strengthens OSPAR's practical approach to protecting the marine environment.

Time does not allow me to address all the important issues covered in OSPAR's work and in our new and ambitious strategy. I hope Ministers can meet more often than once a decade. The sea covers 70% of the surface of our Blue Planet, and we need to bring ocean issues to the highest political level. But let me once again applaud our achievements and our new and ambitious strategy towards 2030. Climate change will be catastrophic for life on land and in the sea – and especially for humankind – if we do not act decisively in this decade. I wish us all good luck with the challenges ahead.

Thank you,