Closing Speech Maritime Spatial Planning & Marine Environment conference

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Good afternoon to everybody and thank you very much, Athena, for chairing the sessions today.

I would like to reinforce the message that we from the Commission and from DG Environment, would like to give in relation to the subject areas that have been discussed today. Coming back to Commissioner Vella this morning, who talked about green and sustainable blue growth, I'd like to present some figures to show what is meant. We recently saw some reports (e.g. "Reviving the Ocean Economy", WWF, 2015) that estimate the overall asset wealth of our oceans at about 25 trillion dollars of which the economic value on its own is about 2.5 trillion dollars per year. This is the gross marine product per year and is a very impressive figure. Even more impressive is that if you want to maintain this economic value, then you have to take into consideration that that is dependent on keeping the oceans healthy and clean, considering that 70 per cent of that economic value stems only from the oceans if they are clean and healthy.

If we want to sustain our economic growth and if we want to keep the oceans in a state from which they can also in the future give us the value from economic activities like shipping, transport and fishing, then we have to make very sure and very clear that we are keeping it in a condition where all the physical, physiological, chemical and biological parameters are being kept intact.

This is a very difficult exercise in view of the current pressures we are facing. For instance, we are still overfishing, at least for certain species. We have to deal with increasing seaborne transport and of course we also have tourism; we all enjoy lying on the beach, swimming in a clean ocean and also getting some other economic value from the touristic sector that is related to either coastal areas or to the ocean itself. We are also viewing the ocean more and more as a possible area where we can get renewable energy from.

The pressure from these economic activities can lead to all the detrimental effects that we already see today, whether it is climate change, which is obviously at the moment the most prominent and being discussed at the moment in Paris, or whether it is chemical pollution, whether it is marine litter, or whether it is other issues: there are changes that are taking place in the physical and chemical composition of the oceans. We know that we have to come to grips with this and that we have to combine the need for increased economic activity with the need for keeping the oceans in a workable condition. We have to bring it all together.

I think the good news here is that we actually have the policy instruments: we have discussed maritime spatial planning, the Marine Strategy Framework Directive and we also have other instruments such as the Strategic Environmental Assessment, the environmental assessments for projects, the Habitats Directive: all these policy instruments are at our hands.

At the moment, we are still using them in a rather un-coordinated way; everybody goes along their paths, and understands their respective policy instrument, but too few of us understand how these policy instruments fit together and how they can actually work together. I do think we are making progress as there are now many working groups that try to understand the linkages between these Directives.

With maritime spatial planning we have a new instrument and there is a particular need to bring this together with the Marine Strategy Framework Directive. We need to understand how and in what way, with what methodologies and with which methods we can make sure that the one instrument, which is integrated planning, fits together with an instrument that is supposed to deliver us clean oceans and good status of the oceans by 2020. It's a big challenge.

I think the discussion that we just had in this last panel about participation and bringing different stakeholders into the picture are extremely important because we know from experience that without doing that at all levels, and I really stress this, it will be very difficult to implement the policies. They are complex and they are not immediately understandable by everybody, so we all have to make an effort to ensure that people who are affected by them and that have to implement them, fully understand what it is that they are doing.

Inevitably, this means that this will also take longer, but it might be better to wait a bit longer and have very good results, rather than rushing something and then see that nobody is implementing it. So this is what you all are doing at the national level and what we are doing at the European level. We are trying to help, to develop instruments and to facilitate this discussion, but we are also looking at the next level: the regional level. We discussed today the Regional Seas Conventions and I think they are extremely important in order to help us master the issues and the challenges that were outlined with regard to the wider ocean areas. We are very grateful and we have all worked hard to make sure that the coordination and cooperation with the Regional Seas Conventions secretariats and the working groups have improved over the last years. We are continuing to do so, whether it is through projects, through funding or through meetings.

Then there is the next layer, which we obviously cannot forget about and which has become more important by the great agreement on the sustainable development goals in June of this year. One of these goals, goal number 14, relates to oceans and we think that this is a great opportunity to bring the different levels together: to integrate this international dimension with the work that is being done at the regional level, at the level of the European Union and at the level of the different Member States. So I think we have all the tools and instruments that we need, and while I believe that the task is very difficult and challenging we should not shy away from it. Progress is surely being made and we need to continue bringing everyone together so that we can have good prospects for achieving the objectives that are set out in the different pieces of legislation.

So I would like to thank you for coming here, for being prepared to discuss, for bringing your experience to the table and also for taking up the future challenges. My colleagues from the Commission and myself are certainly ready to continue this debate and this work. For the time being, I thank you for participating and I would also like to thank Athena Mourmouris for the very good and competent chairing of the sessions. Thank you all and have a good journey back.