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The EU's biodiversity policy – what future for marine ecosystem?

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Conference "International Year of Biodiversity: The Day After and the Greek Reality"

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Ladies and gentlemen,

As Commissioner for Maritime Affairs and Fisheries, my prime objective is to look after fish stocks – for us as well as for future generations.

At the same time, I want to protect the fishing profession now and for generations to come.

These two statements may appear contradictory. Yet, it's very simple: commercial harvesting of fish will only be possible if we maintain healthy marine ecosystems; and the health of an ecosystem depends on its biological diversity.

There follows that all of us - governments, fishermen, citizens - have a vested interest in preserving marine biodiversity.

The international community is starting to acknowledge this: as we saw, in Nagoya last month the Parties put special focus on the marine chapter.

I am very pleased with the outcome of the Conference, and with its new, ambitious Plan to halt the loss of biodiversity by 2020. But I will come back to Nagoya in a minute.

First, I'd like to thank you for inviting me here today and for giving me the opportunity to address today's topic from a European Union perspective.

In the time allotted to me I shall try to give you a brief outline of our policy on biodiversity, both from a general EU viewpoint and from that of my specific mandate. I will also try to touch upon some of the specific challenges that Greece – and the Mediterranean – are facing today.

Biodiversity is a key environmental priority for this Commission's term.

Last March, recognising the urgent need to reverse the trends of biodiversity loss and ecosystem degradation, the Council endorsed a long-term 2050 biodiversity vision and a 2020 headline target. These will underpin the new EU biodiversity strategy that will be finalised by the end of the year.

The Council reaffirmed that the cornerstone of our efforts to preserve biodiversity are protected areas and ecological networks, and stressed the need to fully implement the Birds and Habitats Directives and speed up completion of the Natura 2000 Network.

I regret to say that, across Europe, the process of designation of Natura 2000 sites is nearly complete on land, but it is still lagging behind at sea, especially in offshore areas.

We are keen to see substantial progress by the Member States in designating sufficient marine areas to protect our most vulnerable habitats and species, such as posidonia meadows, coral reefs, sandbanks, sea turtles, seals and marine mammals.

At the same time, because of imminent threats to our marine ecosystems, it is equally important to implement adequate management measures, in cooperation with stakeholders and users of the seas, in order to reverse alarming negative trends.

The importance of such management measures cannot be overstressed. For this, we have been working on several fronts in the last few years.

My department and I are working very hard to conceive a new, modern and environment-friendly Common Fisheries Policy that will guarantee a more sustainable exploitation of our seas and oceans in the years to come.

The way I see it, the new policy will be geographically specified and adaptive, take account of scientific knowledge and uncertainties and strive to balance diverse

social objectives. Most importantly, it will have to be strictly based on an ecosystem approach.

Moreover, for efforts to bear fruit, they have to be shared by all international players and carried out in partnership with them through both bilateral and multilateral relations.

So the EU is a party to all major marine Conventions such as HELCOM, OSPAR, ICCAT, GFCM and the Barcelona Convention. Over the years it has helped design dozens of tailor-made strategies and fed the decisions made by the competent authorities.

We are very active in all UN processes related to biodiversity, and we direct many efforts and resources toward the effective implementation of the provisions of international law that concern the conservation of fragile marine environments.

Coming back to the latest one of these - the 10th meeting of the Convention on Biological Diversity recently held in Nagoya – one cannot help but notice that several of the 20 targets are somehow related to marine life, marine species or water in general.

Going into the specifics of each of them would probably be too time-consuming here. Suffice it to say that the five overarching goals of the Strategic Plan adopted by the Convention are perfectly in line with the objectives we have set ourselves for the upcoming reform of the Common Fisheries Policy.

Let us see:

- One: Initiating action to address the underlying causes of biodiversity loss. In our case the underlying cause is fleet overcapacity, and this is the main issue that the reform seeks to address.
- Two: Taking action now to decrease the direct pressures on biodiversity. Another major goal of the reform: matching fishing pressure with what ecosystems can produce.
- Number three corresponds to Article 11 of the EU's Treaty, which asks to integrate environmental concerns in all specific policies with a view to achieving sustainable development.
- Four and five are about international policy: our Fishery Agreements with third countries put special emphasis on safeguarding the rights of local populations who depend on marine resources and on enhancing local know-how and scientific knowledge.

This harmony of intents reassures me that with the planned reform of the Common Fisheries Policy we are on the right path.

Not only will next year's reform proposals integrate all of these principles; I am also committed to mainstreaming them into all new Commission initiatives concerning both fisheries and maritime affairs.

I will not tolerate any political priority that clashes with the conservation of ecosystems and biological diversity.

Ladies and gentlemen,

If the ecosystem approach forms the foundation, an integrated and comprehensive approach builds the house. Preserving biological diversity at sea is also an issue of effective and all-encompassing maritime governance.

Since 2007 the EU has been developing Integrated Maritime Policy precisely to enable policy makers at every level of governance to pursue a coordinated and sustainable development of maritime activities.

The Commission is quickly developing a series of tools for this purpose, such as common systems for maritime surveillance and spatial planning or the recent Marine Knowledge 2020 initiative. Urgent issues such as maritime safety, substandard shipping and invasive alien species are equally being tackled with.

But good governance also depends on how Member States organise their maritime administrations. I want to congratulate the Greek Government for establishing an integrated Ministry to deal with maritime affairs and fisheries.

This is a very good example of national governance from an integration perspective. Its success will depend on effective coordination with other Ministries whose portfolios contain a maritime dimension and on comprehensive stakeholders' consultation.

This brings me to my last point for today, one that, for obvious reasons, I'm particularly keen on: the Greek seas.

The Greek seas are really exceptional in terms of biodiversity, featuring at least 150 species of commercially exploitable fish species.

In fact, the Mediterranean basin in general has such an exquisitely rich mix of flora and fauna to be considered a "biodiversity hotspot".

At the same time, studies show that its wildlife is more threatened than marine life anywhere else on Earth. Encircled by dense concentrations of humanity and visited by 200 million tourists each year, the Med has been suffering from decades, centuries and even millennia of exploitation.

In our waters alone, endangered species such as the Mediterranean seal and the Mediterranean sea-turtle, 4 dolphin species and even two whale species are struggling to survive in habitats that are now jeopardised by human activities, transport, tourism, pollution, accidental catches and recently climate change.

The same factors pose threats to other protected ecosystems such as the Posidonia beds, which are endemic to our seas.

Is it possible – I wonder – that we have a treasure in our hands and are shamelessly squandering it?

Well, perhaps not entirely shamelessly. We do have a comprehensive legal framework for fisheries management which is based on an ecosystem approach and which can help save the "hotspot": the 2006 Mediterranean Regulation.

Make no mistake: this instrument is far more than a mere "technical measure" imposed by "Brussels" with a top-down approach.

On the contrary, it decentralizes management and lets administrations, scientists and the sector work together to devise national management plans; it accounts for individual regional and sub-regional differences; and it takes environmental concerns into account.

The fisheries management measures it provides for aim at improving gear selectivity, limiting fishing effort, abandoning destructive practices and ultimately protecting preserve nursery areas, spawning grounds and the marine ecosystem from the harmful effects of fishing.

If properly implemented, the Mediterranean Regulation nicely complements the Marine Strategy Framework Directive, and can help ensure levels of human activity that are both sustainable and environmentally acceptable.

On this account I'm afraid I cannot congratulate Greece. Four years on, and despite a generous phasing-in period, the Commission still has concerns as to the implementation of the Regulation by this country, especially with regard to some gear in use and some of the national plans presented.

Yet Greece has a very important role to play in preserving biodiversity. What is it waiting for?

So I ask you to urge our national administration to comply with the entirety of the Regulation as quickly as possible. Other countries are stalling implementation, and if at the end of the day the individual countries fail to show a responsible behaviour, then the Commission will have no choice but imposing its own management plans.

Ladies and gentlemen,

At present in the EU over 80 percent of the stocks are overexploited and over 40 percent are outside safe biological limits. It is widely recognised that badly managed fisheries constitute one of the largest threats to marine biodiversity.

If I were to choose one message for you to bring home tonight, I would say that

I call on you to fight two battles with us.

- One: in the next few years support our reform of the CFP, which, provided we get it right, will mark substantial progress toward sustainability and biodiversity preservation; and
- Two: make pressure on the government to implement the Mediterranean Regulation without further delay.

Both are urgent. Both are difficult. Both are necessary.

But given what is at stake, both are the least we can do.