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Oceans are us

World Ocean Review - Presentation to international press

Check Against Delivery
Seul le texte prononcé fait foi
Es gilt das gesprochene Wort

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Ladies and gentlemen,

I know that on occasions like this it is customary to say that it is a great pleasure to be here. I always say what I mean, but on this occasion I mean it more than on others.

You have done a fantastic and professional job. I am recommending that all my staff read your book.

I know that it is extremely hard to explain the complexities of the sea in a way that is accessible but not simplistic to be precise without being boring or to highlight the real dangers of climate change or overfishing without being apocalyptic. But you have succeeded.

Your book points out that humans are destroying habitats and polluting the sea. But it also indicates opportunities for exploiting the power and diversity of the sea to create economic opportunities for coastal communities and jobs; not only for our underemployed youth but also for their children and their children's children.

Yes, I like this book very much.

You were no doubt wondering whether I was going to say anything about the chapter that is entitled "A negative example – EU fisheries management".

You probably guessed that as Commissioner for Maritime Affairs and Fisheries I would not be very happy to read this chapter. You are right. Yes I am very unhappy to read that "in recent years, there has been a dramatic decline in fish stocks in some cases, as well as a significant decrease in fishing industry profits." You point out that 88% of European fish stocks, measured against maximum sustainable yield, are overexploited. But this is true and we have to recognize it.

Well, some fish stocks have recovered slightly in the past five years or so, though progress is not as fast as we would like. On the whole your diagnosis is the same as ours and I want as many people as possible to be made aware of the situation.

For achieving a real change, we are shortly embarking on the biggest reform of the Common Fisheries Policy since its inception. We have spoken to those who study the fish, those who catch them, those who process them, those who sell them, those who cook them and those who eat them. We have analysed their proposals for change without excluding a-priori any option.

Our proposal will shortly be adopted by the College of Commissioners and I hope that, one day soon, the reformed Common Fisheries Policy will be presented in the Ocean Review 2020 as a positive story- rather than an overriding threat to Europe's seas and oceans.

However, let us look to the future. Your chapter on "medical knowledge from the sea" shows the potential of extracting compounds from marine organisms for fighting cancer or breakdowns of the human immune system.

How can the EU help to stimulate this promising industry?

We have already taken some steps; we have clarified what biotechnological processes and products can and cannot be patented through the Biopatent Directive.

But we need to simplify the process of protecting intellectual property rights. Translations and legal fees mean that it costs fifteen times more to obtain a patent in all 27 Member States than in the US. We need to continue working towards a EU patent.

We also need to accelerate exploration.

The ocean is large and some of these organisms are found in small quantities in inaccessible areas.

The European Strategy Forum on Research Infrastructures promotes a coordinated approach. This allows the sharing of expensive research vessels, submarines and other essential equipment for exploring the deep.

Our "marine knowledge 2020" initiative is helping researchers know where to look. Consortia of laboratories from the EU are building up consistent pictures of the seas round Europe: underwater canyons, mountains, volcanoes, sediments, and marine life – from plankton to whales.

European taxpayers have spent a lot of money on marine observations – we calculate one and a half billion euro per year. We need to be sure that we make the best possible use of this information. So we facilitate the access to marine data to everybody. This will help the development of another opportunity that has rightly been identified in your book; renewable energy.

Let me give you an example: a major developer, Mainstream Renewable Energy, with licenses to develop six gigawatts in the North Sea has approached us. Now, six gigawatts is a lot of power; maybe equivalent to four nuclear power stations. They reckon that they will be spending a hundred million euro on marine data for the planning, construction and operation phase of their turbines and they do not want to waste time and money searching for the data, negotiating with hundreds of suppliers and patching together inconsistent and incompatible data.

We are working to incorporate their needs into the next phase of "marine knowledge 2020". Better access to data will also accelerate the development of renewable marine energy from tides and waves as described in your book.

I should say something about climate change. This is also a theme that runs throughout your book. Indeed three out of ten of your chapter have "climate" in the title.

We really need to drive home the message that if we are to understand the future climate of this planet we need to understand the oceans.

The oceans are the largest reservoir of carbon dioxide. Melting icecaps in Greenland and Antarctica raise the global sea-level. Shifts in Atlantic circulation will change the severity or mildness of Europe's seasons.

If we do not understand the oceans then we will not understand how climate change will affect such important European sectors as agriculture, fisheries, transport industry and tourism.

I believe that this report will stimulate and underpin debate on the oceans in the same way that the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change assessments stimulate debate on the climate. I look forward to listening to and joining in these debates.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I look forward to a time when the way we treat oceans - and the living creatures in them- in the way that they really deserve. I look forward to the day that politicians treat policies that have an impact on the ocean in the same respectful and fruitful way that you have treated the science of oceans.

We must adopt a long-stretching vision. We must make the 21st century a time of renewal.

And we can. Let us never forget that wherever there is love of nature, there is love of humanity.