JUBILEE SESSION

40th anniversary of the Helsinki Convention

Helsinki, 5 March 2014

\*\*\*

Distinguished Delegates, Ladies and Gentlemen

1. On behalf of the executive director of UNEP. It is my great pleasure to join the celebration of one of the first Regional Seas Programmes to be established, 40 years ago. HELCOM has demonstrated true leadership in building a strong transboundary cooperation framework that allows its member states to protect and manage in a sustainable manner the various resources and services provided by the Baltic Sea.
2. Life gets better after 40 is quite an appropriate slogan for the 40th jubilee as HELCOM has made much progress over the last 40 years and has many experiences that will no doubt contribute to successes in the upcoming years.
3. 40 years of action. That is the slogan that UNEP is utilizing to highlight the 40th anniversary of the Regional Seas Programme, created in March of 1974 - just 2 years after the foundational United Nations Conference on the Human Environment, held Stockholm in 1972.
4. Looking back at that moment in time when the leaders that preceded us, decided that we needed to take bold steps to protect our environment, not only because we faced a very dangerous outlook if we did not take action, but also because we realized that our fate as human beings, was linked to the fate of our planet.
5. It was with that outlook in mind that the Regional Seas Programme was established by countries to protect our oceans and coasts. Today we proudly say that 143 countries are part of 18 Conventions and Action Plans around the world.
6. After 40 years of action, we celebrate many achievements of the regional seas around the world. And we can celebrate successes from different perspectives - political, environmental, legal and economic.
7. In some regions the regional sea convention can be the only platform where countries in conflict or dispute can meet, as we have seen in the Mediterranean for nearly 40 years where it is the only platform where Israel, Arab states, North Africa, the Eastern Europeans and Western Europeans meet on a level playing field. In Asia for more than 20 years the COBSEA brings together china, Vietnam and Philippines to the table to talk to each other and their neighbors on marine and coastal issues despite their territorial differences.
8. Regional seas convention and action plans in many areas have developed to often be the only legally recognized intergovernmental platforms for taking regional action on marine issues, especially outside of the fisheries sector. This reflects the recognition of their role and value to member states in convening discussions and generating action - another global success for regional seas.
9. The regional seas also make economic sense - cost of effectiveness of economy of scale in taking a similar approach and leveraging resources. In some developing countries their contribution to the secretariat cost leverage a 1:8 ratio for every dollar or higher.
10. Environmentally, many regions have been able to drastically reduce pollution levels from the land entering their regional seas,the protocol on land based sources of pollution is a common feature across the regional seas programme and in many areas has been catalytic in establishing a regional framework for national action to address a range of pollutants.
11. Other accomplishments on the pollution front include an improved capacity of countries to respond to emergency spills of oil and other hazardous substances. We have also seen an increased number of Marine Protected Areas declared, protocols on integrated coastal zone management and specially protected areas and wildlife established, amongst many other accomplishments.
12. These accomplishments also follow the trends in development of the environment agenda demonstrating how the regional seas have been responsive to the changing needs of its member countries, and often HELCOM has been in the lead - mostly recently in it Green Economy/Ocean Valuation work.
13. These accomplishment have not been without their challenges. Still we are seeing our oceans heavily threatened to the point where its natural resources are being over exploited in many seas and oceans. Our fisheries, in some regions, have collapsed. In others, they are nearing collapsing levels. And yet, we still continue the use of unsustainable subsidies estimated at around USD $15–35 billion annually.
14. Similarly, we have seen exponential growth in the amounts of nitrogen and phosphorus entering our oceans, creating more than 500 dead zones across 245,000 square kilometres of coasts and oceans. Here in the Baltic Sea, this remains a serious issue that is being tackled through HELCOM.
15. Ocean acidification due to climate change is another emerging issue that is heavily threatening the productivity of our oceans. And while the source is related to cutting CO2 and other gas emissions from land activities, our Regional Seas are working to ensure marine and coastal ecosystems are healthy and resilient as possible to the impacts of climate change.
16. We also know that human impacts have resulted in a loss of more than 20 per cent of mangroves, 30 per cent of sea grass beds and 20 per cent of coral reefs. At the same time we know that these crucial ecosystems are responsible for many socio-economic benefits for coastal communities. For instance, it is estimated that ecotourism from coral reefs reaches USD 9 billion per year.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

1. We find ourselves at another monumental point in time. Like our predecessors we must take bold steps to address the growing degradation of our oceans.
2. Through the Regional Seas Conventions and Action Plans we have strong frameworks to address the drivers of change that continue harm our efforts towards a healthy marine environment that can ensure food security, provide sustainable livelihoods while respecting its cultural and spiritual values.
3. The Helsinki Convention is a pivotal component in the regional efforts to stop the degradation of the Baltic Sea, but I also believe in the need to have coordinated efforts within the framework of the Law of the Sea and Regional Fisheries Management Organizations so that we can secure the ecological foundation for food security.
4. There is little doubt that the economic rationale is there to call for increased investments to protect the natural resources of the Baltic Sea. With an estimated investment of EUR 2.8 billion, the potential benefit could be around EUR 3.8 billion, according to the BalticSTERN report.
5. UNEP has led efforts through the Green Economy for Oceans, to illustrates how oceans, seas and coasts would benefit from a transition towards a green economy in key sectors that depend and influence the state of the marine and coastal environment.
6. For the Baltic region, this area of work is very relevant as five key marine sectors: fisheries, tourism, shipping, renewable energy and pollution, are addressed by the UNEP report, and can help to further shape and advance the region’s goals and objectives.
7. In this context, it is encouraging to see the emergence of marine-based renewable energy in this region, which is offering new opportunities for job creation while at the same time diversifying your energy sources. Nonetheless, it is important to acknowledge the different national contexts, and that each country may pursue its own unique and appropriate pathway towards a green economy.

Distinguished Delegates

1. We hope that through the leadership of the countries involved in the Regional Seas Conventions and Action Plans, we will see a significant evolution of ocean governance in the coming 40 years, and that Life gets better after 40 for all 18 of them.
2. Time and time again, member states have rallied round the Helsinki Convention to address various governance issues such as pollution, sustainable development, marine protected areas and wildlife and have done so successfully.
3. UNEP is convinced that member states will continue supporting the Helsinki Convention and we are very grateful to all of you for making HELCOM one of the most visibly successful Regional Seas Programmes.
4. UNEP congratulates you once again for a very successful 40 years and wishes you another great 40 years.

Thank you for your attention.

\*\*\*