

Speech by Tiago Pitta e Cunha

**Meeting of the Group of the Friends of the Ocean and SEAS of the United Nations
(New York, May 17th, 2017)**

Your Excellences,

Mrs. and Mr. Ambassadors,

Members of the Group of the Friends of the Ocean of the United Nations,

Let me begin by expressing my gratitude to the Ambassador of Singapore, for hosting this event and for, together with the Ambassador of Portugal, inviting me to address you today, just a few days before the UN Ocean Conference.

It is not only a unique opportunity, but of immense significance to me to address such a distinguished audience, as I started my ocean policy career over here, at the United Nations, in the nineties.

To work on ocean affairs was not an easy task those days as for many years, following the long period of negotiation of the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea there was a sense of fatigue for ocean discussions at the UN. I was, thus, surprised when I came, last February, to the Preparatory Meeting of the UN Ocean Conference to attend Side Events full of people. In my times, back at the end of the nineties, it was a good measure to provide

lunch during the side events' sessions, so that you would seat a few people for a while talking about ocean and seas affairs.

But, the fact that ocean matters are becoming more important to the UN and are attracting more attention is not only a positive sign. It is a clear necessity, and I am afraid also a symptom of the ocean crisis.

In fact, the ocean is in a much worse environmental situation than most people realize.

I know we have been hearing for years that we are too close to overtake the limits from where it will not be possible to recover, but today we know that corals, which have been around for millions of years, are dying massively because of higher water temperatures, combined with chronic over and destructive fishing. Marine predators are almost gone and they will disappear soon, if we do not change our fishing uses of the ocean drastically. Seabed grass areas are also disappearing fast and these depletions will withdraw from the ocean system critical ecosystem services, of which a lot of the ocean bounty depends upon to be generated.

With no marine predators, no corals, no seabed grass around anymore, and with just a few mangroves and a lot of plastic in between, which is the foreseeable scenery, the ocean ecosystem will decline irreversibly to our detriment.

How did we arrive at this point?

Several reasons concur for this situation. First of all, we are terrestrial animals and we do not see, listen or communicate under the sea-water. It is, thus, very hard for us to really understand the ocean. How it works.

For instance, we learn geography at school and get to know the mountains, the valleys, the forests or the steppes. But we do not learn about the ocean geography the same way: canyons, corals, sea-mounts, abysses, seabed grass prairies, coastal mangroves or marshlands are less likely to be taught and understood.

Furthermore, the ocean is very large as it covers more than 70% of the planet's surface. Such an almost endless dimension, coupled with our lack of knowledge, makes a lot of people to think that the ocean is indestructible. In many ways, it is like the popular saying "far from sight, far from the heart" and, in this case, far from the mind, as well.

Also, the ocean, in its bio-chemical system, is much more complex than the land, or the atmosphere. With all the great progresses achieved in marine science and technology, we still do not understand a lot of how things happen in the ocean. What leads to what?

Due to these reasons there is a misperception, or if you prefer an erroneous perception, about the ocean condition that makes people think the ocean is in better shape than it really is. This misperception is dangerous, because it leads us to do nothing about the incredible blue environmental crisis that is looming. It is dangerous also, because it is a persistent misperception.

Already, at the times of the UNCLOS deliberations, in the seventies, scientists told us of the dangers of over-fishing and pollution and of the complex interconnections of the ocean ecosystem. This is why the preamble of UNCLOS says «*ocean matters are interrelated and need to be treated as a whole*». It was a remarkable statement, but, nevertheless, almost 40 years passed and the ocean environment, in most aspects, is still deteriorating.

What this tell us is that two generations have passed, but the knowledge gap about the ocean between scientists and common people remains wide open. The misperception persists.

In these circumstances, awareness is a key ammunition in the fight to solve the ocean's problems.

Let me explain: In some ways, the ocean discussions lie where climate change was 25 years ago, before the Kyoto Protocol. Understood as a critical problem by scientists, it was ignored by most people, including decision-makers. Like in the case of the ocean today, there was a time when awareness was also a critical issue to climate change. Who has not seen the movie by Al Gore and how it became a game-changer in that context? Or heard about the Stern Report on the economics of climate change?

In time, with education and awareness, climate change evolved from an environmental, green subject, to an economic one and from there to a political issue. It is now in the top of the global agenda and it is becoming

one of the critical matters that will rule our lives, our societies and our economies for generations to come.

Today, climate change is, thus, by all means, perceived as a human problem, that affects us all. This is right, because humans, naturally, worry with human problems. We worry with financial and economic crisis, with wars and migrations, with our lack of security and the rise of terrorism. But we tend not to worry, or at least not to worry so much, with problems that we perceive to affect only nature, birds, whales or trees. And, unfortunately most people, at least in Europe, still see the ocean problems, as problems that are far away from them and that affect mostly the fish, sea creatures and maybe (for some better informed) the marine biodiversity as a whole. Here lies, allow me to use a theological expression, the original sin!

Because, quite to the contrary, the ocean and seas play a fundamental role on most of our critical challenges: They are essential for globalization, as the latter is mostly about international trade and such trade travels by sea, through shipping and sea-ports; they are critical for the security of energy supply (tankers and LNG terminals makes us less dependent from pipelines), as well as for energy sustainability (which will also be provided by offshore renewables); they are important for peace and security, given the tensions raising in several maritime basins; they play a key role in the current ecologic crisis, and, last but not least, the ocean is intrinsically interlinked with climate change, both by mitigating it through temperature retention and carbon

storage and sequestration, and by being the first victim of its negative impacts, including sea-level rise, the destruction of coastal ecosystems such as through coral bleaching, or acidification.

It is, hence, in my view, very important to be able to change the way we tend to look at the ocean problems, from just a green/ environmental issue into an economic problem, even a political one and, therefore, making it a human problem, as well. Very much the same way it happened with climate change. Following this logic, it is important for ocean deliberations to tag along with climate change action and discussions. This is, actually, what quite a number of UN Member States, which took the floor at the UN Preparatory Meeting, in February, expressed, when they said it is important to use the UN Ocean Conference to emphasize, the issues of climate change and the blue economy. In fact, these key issues are almost absent from the way SDG 14 is framed, and the coming UN Ocean Conference is an opportunity to address this.

The Oceano Azul Foundation understands the importance of moving the ocean agenda in this direction and is determined to contribute to the creation of a *momentum* bringing awareness to a new triangular agenda, which will join up the dots between the ocean system; climate change; and the blue economy.

In this context, we are satisfied that, in a dialogue with the Ministry for Foreign Affairs of Portugal and in full cooperation with the Portuguese Mission to the United Nations, we have decided to assist delegates from

Small Island Developing States in attending the UN Ocean Conference. We hope, in the future, to enter into public-private partnerships with other governments. We are also developing partnerships with like-minded players (you may see in the brochure of the Foundation how much we are investing in networking and in creating alliances with like-minded partners). The US Packard and Waitt Foundations, the Albert the II of Monaco Foundation, the Oak Foundation, are examples of private sector entities with whom we are already cooperating.

Within the UN Ocean Conference, besides pledging a number of voluntary commitments, we are also co-organizing with the Global Ocean Forum a Side Event, promoting a Road Map for Ocean, Blue economy and Climate Action (ROCA). We would be very honored to see you there on the 8th of June.

Partnerships are critical to deal with such an immense challenge, as it is the ocean challenge we face. In the sea there are no borders and, thus, even more than in land, only working together will move us forward. We have still a long way to go in the direction of creating public-private partnerships, but your efforts and the conclusions of the UN Ocean Conference will hopefully be a positive step in that direction.

Mrs. and Mr. Ambassadors,

Ladies and gentlemen,

Allow me to finish by explaining how do we in the Oceano Azul Foundation intend to move forward. We will position ourselves in the quest for awareness

and what it takes to generate it. This requires an investment in literacy and education. Which, on its turn, will bring the awareness we need to generate mobilization, followed by real action.

I have explained how linking the ocean with climate change is of paramount importance for the ocean cause. I also think the same is valid for linking the ocean with the blue economy. Because the ocean is a power house for new industries, which will help us decarbonize our economies and societies. This will happen in energy production (with offshore renewables); in the transportation sector with clean shipping; in the food sector with aquaculture – and the production of marine proteins on a scale not known yet, (especially marine vegetable proteins), and in the development of the new, innovative bio economy sectors of the future, including blue biotechnology and blue bio resources industries, which are emerging with applications in pharmaceuticals, nutraceuticals, cosmetics, food, bio-materials and polymers, or bio fuels and bioremediation materials.

In conclusion,

» Let us act together – including through public-private partnerships - to save what is left, as soon as possible. To this end marine protected areas and maritime spatial planning are very important tools of ocean governance.

» Let us educate a new generation fully aware of the ocean as a fundamental for human wellbeing and Knowing that the Planet's remaining blue natural

capital is a precondition for economic growth. In other words, a generation that sees the ocean problem as a human problem as well.

» And, finally, let us pioneer a vision for the sustainable use of the sea that integrates marine ecosystem, climate change, and the blue economy together towards a single goal: to allow the ocean to continue to be the key life support system of the Planet and, even more than today, a healthy and living source of economic growth and wellbeing for future generations.

Thank you for your attention.

New York City, 17th May, 2017

Tiago Pitta e Cunha