Our Ocean is our future

Our Ocean is central to our livelihoods, our identities, our culture and the future of our planet. From the cold Arctic to the warm waters of the Coral Triangle to the dark depths of the Pacific, the world’s ocean shapes our lives, feeds our people, provides jobs, and supports a global family of over 7.5 billion people.

However, it will take action by us all to sustain this source of life. Current trends point to diminishing ocean health and wealth: declining fisheries, a warmer, more acidic, and an increasingly polluted ocean. This is a future no one wants, and not one to pass on to our children. Therefore, we need to make a new contract between humanity and the Ocean that balances ocean protection with economic production and human prosperity. In short, we need to build a sustainable ocean economy.

As the leaders of maritime nations, we have placed the ocean at the heart of our sustainable development plans and to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals.

As the hosts of the 2018, 2019 and 2020 Our Ocean conferences, we call on other governments, industries and the public to join us. Our Ocean Conferences, started by former U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry, have been remarkably successful at delivering ocean actions. Since their launch in 2014, the annual conferences have generated USD 18 billion in ocean commitments and protected 12.4 million square kilometres of ocean. In Bali this week, Norway in 2019, and Palau in 2020, states, cities, investors, businesses, scientists and youth leaders will build on this progress and identify new ways to regenerate the ocean.

Along with nine fellow leaders, we launched the High Level Panel for a Sustainable Ocean Economy during the UN General Assembly in September. As the first ocean initiative of serving heads of government, the Panel will inject political leadership into the search for ocean solutions and help push the ocean to the top of global agendas.

Today, the balance between protection and production is dangerously off-kilter. People are showing that they demand better for the ocean by mobilizing against the scourge of plastic pollution. Marine littering is one of the fastest growing environmental concerns, and has galvanized communities to action. It is inspiring and important, but plastic pollution is just the tip of the iceberg when it comes to the complex, accelerating threats facing the ocean, and the solutions needed to confront them.

The World Bank estimates that USD 83 billion are lost every year due to over- and illegal fishing, while we face losing coral reefs and experiencing sea ice-free summers in the Arctic by the middle of the century. Altering this projection will take decisive action by governments and businesses globally – which is precisely what the Panel is aimed at activating.

Working on a tight, two-year schedule, the Panel will harness the leading expertise to investigate technological, policy and financial innovations with the potential to trigger the shifts in Ocean needed to
boost food and energy production, build resilience to climate change, and provide for the sustainable societies of the future. In 2020, we will present a roadmap for transitioning to a Sustainable Ocean Economy, including a political Action Agenda that will be pursued at the highest levels of government and business.

We are ambitious but pragmatic in our goals for the Panel. We also know from experience that it is possible to protect the ocean while making sure it supports all of us for generations to come. For ocean-dependent countries like ours, there is no choice, and sometimes the decisions do not come easy but we are seeing signs of hope and optimism.

In Indonesia, an ongoing campaign to stamp out illegal fishing has eliminated 5,000 rouge vessels, saved millions of tonnes of fish, and made the country a leader in the fight against corruption in the industry, all while experiencing nearly 10% growth in domestic fisheries. Norway and its neighbours have shown the world how science-based management can bring fish stocks back from the brink of collapse. Now harvested sustainably, Arctic cod stocks are today the largest in the world, worth USD 2 billion a year. Palau has shown that marine protected areas can prove to have a spill over effect for the region and replenish areas that have been overfished. These win-win stories show that a growing ocean economy can, and must, be pursued in unison with a healthy marine environment. We can reap benefits from the ocean without destroying it.

We see our future reflected in the Our Ocean Conference. If we can shift the trajectory of ocean decline, we can help set the whole world on a sustainable course. For too long the ocean has been a victim of humanity’s carelessness and exploitation, a depository for our waste and our carbon emissions, and a side issue for world leaders. The Panel envisages the ocean as a protagonist, a key driver of development and wellbeing for all people. And this future, that unleashes the untapped potential of the ocean, is within our grasp.

This is Our Ocean and now is our moment to embark on an era of harmony and prosperity between humanity and the sea.