Speech: Actions on Ocean Acidification – the Other CO2 Problem – Towards Realising Sustainable Development

Distinguished guests,

It is great to be part of Oceans Action Day and this important programme of work to advance ocean issues such as ocean acidification within the climate context.

It is important we provide a clear vision and direction to mobilise the ocean agenda at the UNFCCC.

Why does it matter? Because our planet is changing, our oceans are changing too and we have the opportunity to work together, using cutting-edge science and innovative policy, to realise our ambition for the ocean.

Our seas and ocean make up around two thirds of the planet – and the UK is at the forefront of scientific research to improve our ocean observations and understanding of the marine environment.

The UK is an island nation, half of us live within 40 miles of the coast, so our lives are inextricably linked with the ocean. It is our global life–support system.

Where I represent in the UK Parliament is a constituency called Suffolk Coastal – the only constituency with the word coast in it – and we look out across the North Sea to the world with a rich marine environment supporting tourism, renewable energy and also have enterprise like fishing, Felixstowe port, which is key for transporting goods from around the world into and out of the UK.

These are the tangible relationships we have with our seas.

We see today the effect of climate change and the climate projections reflect that the challenges ahead that we see directly are stark. While the rising sea levels that risk flooding to communities and to agricultural land are obvious, we should also worry about what is happening in the depths of the ocean.

The ocean stores carbon but we are still unsure how much carbon is permanently removed from the climate system. In the past 150 years, it has absorbed half of all the carbon dioxide that human beings have generated. This has led to ocean acidification, which is happening fast and threatens marine life.

Coral reefs are being damaged by this acidification and by the rise in the temperature of the water that surrounds them. Corals provide vital habitats; they sustain some of the richest biodiversity on this planet and hundreds of

millions of people depend on them for food, fishing and tourist revenue, and protection against storms.

In the UK we are concerned by the recent special report by the Inter-Government Panel on Climate Change, specifically where the Panel predicted that even if temperature rise were limited to 1.5oC, 70% of coral reefs would disappear. With a 2ºC rise, virtually all would be lost.

This is why Australia, Belize and Mauritius are leading the Commonwealth Blue Charter action plan on Coral Reef Protection and Restoration, and today I am very pleased to say that we are joining them. This action group will be a platform to promote collaborative research, workshops and seminars, showcasing successful case studies among the Commonwealth partners.

The ongoing warming of the ocean is reducing its ability to absorb carbon dioxide. Recently published work on the UK Shelf Seas highlights the key processes that maintain their status, variability and response to impacts.

The UK recently joined the International Partnership for Blue Carbon to help improve understanding of the importance of the carbon stored in our seas and coastal ecosystems and the lessons for policy in monitoring, managing and valuing these precious habitats.

Mangrove forests, which we should rebrand “blue forests”, are some of the most carbon rich and productive habitats on earth. As well as playing a critical role in supporting endangered biodiversity and carbon sequestration they have other benefits including storm protection, erosion prevention and climate change adaption and resilience; hundreds of millions of coastal people rely on mangroves for their day to day livelihoods as they enable sustainable aquaculture.

The UK recognises that the IPBC drives vital enhancements in the understanding of, and accelerates action on, the important role that mangroves and other blue carbon ecosystems play in bringing biodiversity, climate change resilience and economic benefits.

And, this is why yesterday I announced that the UK will also join the Fiji-led Commonwealth Blue Charter Action Group on ocean and climate change to raise ambition for ocean health and climate action and restoration of carbon-sequestering ecosystems such as mangroves, coastal swamps and seagrass.

The truth is that the ocean is trying to tell us something. This is no distant threat that can be put off and dealt with later – we need to tell the story of the damage carbon emissions are having on the ocean now. We need to raise these issues and to do something about it here in Poland.

That’s the challenge to live within our carbon means and the means of our biodiversity and our ecosystems that support us.

So what can we do about it?

The UK’s commitment to the Paris Agreement and to tackling global climate change remains steadfast. The Talanoa Dialogue is a critical moment for the

world to take stock of progress and to discuss opportunities for further action. It will be vital that countries update their international commitments (NDCs) in light of the Dialogue, as well as the IPCC's 1.5 Special Report.

And to help us do that, we need the best science to turn the best understanding we have into the best steps we can take.

This is why HMG is supporting Plymouth Marine Laboratory in leading the first European hub as part of a global network to observe and assess ocean acidification and its impact upon the world's ocean.

This initiative is part of a wider research community action, the Global Ocean Acidification Observing Network (GOA-ON), which has encouraged the formation of regional hubs in North America, Latin America, Africa and the Western Pacific to collaborate on all aspects of OA monitoring research. This new hub for the NE Atlantic will complement these existing hubs and is a brilliant example of how we will continue to drive global efforts to improve ocean acidification monitoring and ensure we best understand how the ocean and marine life will adapt to these changes.

Collaboration is essential and the UK is supporting the work others are doing to coordinate on ocean observations and science through the G7 Future of the Seas and Oceans Working Group as well as initiatives such as New Zealand's Commonwealth Blue Charter Action Group on Ocean Acidification. And I am happy to announce that that the UK is joining the New Zealand–led Commonwealth Blue Charter Ocean Acidification action group.

The role of science and data was underpinned by Canada in their G7 Presidency. This matters because we need to help protect our marine environment from the multiple stresses we have put upon it.

A recent publication from The UK Marine Climate Change Impacts Partnership (MCCIP) has examined the impacts climate change will have on our unique UK habitats, from coral gardens to seagrass beds…..from saline lagoons to saltmarshes and the links between plankton, fish and birds.

That is not to say that we abandon sustainable blue growth.

But we do have to stop behaving as if the riches the ocean gives us is inexhaustible. In the UK, we have committed £26.5 million to the Commonwealth Marine Economies programme to support sustainable economic growth in the most vulnerable Small Island Developing States.

We must all learn how to sustainably use and protect these precious assets. And that's why we need this Oceans Action Day to remind us of the importance of the two thirds of our world blue spaces that are just as precious as our green spaces.

Now, what we are discussing here today, is a powerful reason why we need to continue to build the momentum and raise the awareness on the relevance of ocean–related issues in the climate change realm.

Science is the spur to action but it will require a huge amount of political will. This is challenging as we balance the consequences of the carbon-based development that we've enjoyed with trying to secure these benefits for all of the world's people.

So we need:

- To build on the excellent examples of coordination to strengthen partnership working across the globe on ocean observations
- To promote our excellence in science beyond the scientific community
- To recognise the importance of ocean-climate scientific research and the role it plays in climate action

Let us work together to for a better marine environment.

That's the task facing us – you can count on the UK to work with you to achieve it.

Thank you.