

Key note address for the Acting Prime Minister of Tonga,

Hon. Siaosi 'O Sovaleni

International Conference on Whales in a Changing Ocean

4 April 2017

SALUTATION:-

Deputy Prime Minister of Samoa, Hon. Fiame Naomi Mataafa

Honourable Ministers

Members of the Diplomatic Corps

Director General of SPREP

Government Representatives

Rev. Tevita Tapueluelu & Member of Clergies

Distinguished guests

Ladies and gentlemen

Malo e lelei and very good morning!

I am indeed honored to officiate this very important event *Whales in a Changing Ocean* this morning.

I would also like to join the Hon Minister for Fisheries, in welcoming you all to the friendly shores of the Kingdom.

For the past 40 years, the Government of Tonga has been in the forefront of a deliberate effort to protect and conserve the whales in the South Pacific.

Of course, whales are at the centre of many Pacific cultures, but [perhaps] none more so than in Tonga. Centuries ago, whales guided our ancestors in their voyaging canoes to landfall, and their regular appearance in our coastal waters to breed and give birth is still a significant event.

Scientists tell us that Tonga is [ONE of] the most important country in the Pacific islands for humpback whales, *Tofua'a* in Tongan, and the winter home for half of the entire population of breeding humpback whales between New Caledonia and French Polynesia.

After nearly 80 years of hunting in our islands last century, however, it was clear that whales in Tonga were close to extinction. Since the Royal decree of 1978 by HM King Tupou IV, which banned the hunting of whales in Tongan waters, four years before the global moratorium on commercial whaling by the International Whaling Commission, as DG of SPREP, the Tongan breeding populations have recovered from less than 50 to more than 2000 whales – it is said, this is one of the world’s great conservation success stories. The Royal Decree was further supported by the introduction of the Fisheries Act 1989, which called for prohibition of killing of cetacean animals - whales and dolphins, and the enactment of the Whale Watching and Swimming Act in 2009.

Whales are ecologically, culturally and economically important for Tonga and the wider Pacific. Tonga has one of the fastest growing whale watching industries in the world, which is expanding and injecting millions into the Tongan economy each year. However, whales are not saved. Today, they still face many threats, including climate change, bycatch in fisheries, and whaling.

Over the years, Tonga has been working closely with our regional partners, SPREP and SPC, and other international partners, which provides the scientific research and advisory capacity towards the conservation of the cetaceans mammals and their habitats in the Pacific region. In 1982, the Tonga Visitors Bureau, Vava’u Tourism Association and the Tonga Whale Watching Operators Association held our first whale watching workshop hosted by the International Fund for Animal Welfare, also known as IFAW. Subsequent training sessions were conducted since those days. Additionally, a workshop that was held around 2008, funded by New Zealand, co-chaired by the New Zealand High Commissioner, Christine Bogle, and HRH Salote Pilolevu Tuita, where one of the recommendations that came out of this workshop was for the Government of Tonga to consider the declaration of a whale sanctuary.

I would like to congratulate the conference committee for coming up with this most appropriate title for our conference '*Whales in a Changing Ocean*'. It is very appropriate and fitting that we should be reminded of our changing Pacific ocean, our changing environment and of course our changing climate. I wish you all a successful Conference and hope that you will have a pleasant and enjoyable stay here in the Kingdom.

In observance of the Royal Proclamation of His Majesty King Tupou IV in 1978, I wish to Re-affirm that all Tongan waters is declared a Sanctuary for Whales. The ban against the hunting and killing of whales in Tongan waters remains in force. Additionally, the Kingdom of Tonga will persevere with its commitment to providing sanctuary to, and protection of, whales.

Tu'a 'ofa atu.