

Sarah Walsh speech notes for “Whales in a Changing Ocean” conference

Tanoa Hotel, Nuku'alofa, Tonga

4 April 2017

Tongan Deputy Prime Minister Siaosi Sovaleni
Deputy Prime Minister, Samoa
Ministers
SPREP DG Kosi Latu,
Rev. Tevita Tapueluelu Faifekau
Diplomatic colleagues,
Distinguished guests

Tena koutou, tena koutou, tena tatou katoa
Malo e laumalie. Malo e me'a mai.
Good morning ladies and gentlemen

- Thank you for the opportunity to speak at this important event. It is a pleasure to be here with you all today.
- The Whales in a Changing Ocean Conference is the highlight of SPREP's Year of the Whale programme.
- It represents a crucial coming-together of people with a passion for our whales, our ocean and our futures.
- I would like to thank the Government of Tonga for their kind hosting of this event, and the Secretariat of the Pacific Regional Environment Programme for their organisation.
- **New Zealand is very proud to be a sponsor of this conference.**

Whales

- We are here because we share a common concern about the challenges facing our whales.
- Pacific whale populations have now recovered from the verge of extinction.
- However, they are now facing new dangers which once again threaten their existence.
- Today, our Pacific whales are at significant risk from a variety of emerging threats.
- These include climate change, entanglement and marine debris.
- Acknowledging and addressing these threats is crucial as they will ultimately impact on all of us.
- New Zealand is a Pacific Island Nation, and like all island nations, the **ocean and its resources are vital to our way of life.**
- The Pacific region's ocean resources are critical not only from an *environmental* perspective, but also an **economic** perspective.
- **Whale watching**, in particular, presents a unique opportunity for **tourism** and revenue generation for the Pacific region, but it must be managed in a way that does not **compromise their long-term sustainability.**
- Our futures are collectively connected to those of these whales, and this ocean, and our abilities to conserve and protect them.
- Healthy whales and a healthy ocean are clearly in all our interests.

Coordination

- That is why this conference is so important.

- It presents an opportunity for stakeholders from all paths – from government to civil society – to come together and confront these challenges collaboratively, and with purpose.
- We see taking a precautionary and coordinated approach as critical to how we achieve this.
- It is **essential we harness and share the expertise, experience, and innovation that exist across the region to protect this common resource.**
- Regional coordination is not a new concept for us.
- SPREP's Whales and Dolphin Action Plan and the CMS Memorandum of Understanding for the Conservation of Pacific Island Cetaceans are good examples of how we have committed to work together to protect our cetacean populations.
- New Zealand is proud to have cooperated closely with many of the participating organisations here today across a range of projects in our waters, including research on humpback whales in the Cook Strait, pygmy blue whales in the South Taranaki Bight, and Bryde's whales in the Hauraki Gulf.
- We have also worked with the University of Auckland, in association with the South Pacific Whale Research Consortium, to investigate the feeding habits and migration pathways of New Zealand humpback whales.
- Our experience has demonstrated that **engaging in targeted partnerships is an effective way of achieving meaningful results.**

Announcement

- Partnerships are important to us and I take the opportunity to announce today that the New Zealand Government will be providing funding for **Niuean NGO Oma Tafua** to conduct humpback whale research in Niue.
- We will be funding a boat charter to allow Oma Tafua to conduct valuable research which can then be compared across the Pacific region, filling data gaps and contributing to greater regional conservation efforts.
- It is this kind of targeted cooperation in the Pacific that makes a practical and immediate difference.

Conclusion

- Achieving meaningful and lasting outcomes for whales requires dedication and coordination.
- It is up to all of us to leverage opportunities like this conference to come together, have the discussions, examine the opportunities, and address the challenges.
- The more we can do this, the more we will make real, sustainable difference to protecting our Pacific whales.
- Thank you. Malo au'pito.