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The Pacific environment, sustaining our livelihoods and natural heritage in harmony with our cultures.

ADDRESS BY KOSI LATU, DIRECTOR GENERAL, SPREP, AT THE OPENING SESSION OF

WHALES IN A CHANGING OCEAN

Hon. Siaosi Sovaleni, Acting Prime Minister of Tonga
Hone Fiame Naomi Mataafa Deputy Prime Minister of Samoa
Hon Kiriau Turepu Minister of Environment of the Cook Islands
Hon Semisi Fakahau, Minister of Fisheries, Tonga
Hon Semisi Sika, Minister of Tourism Tonga,
Members of the Tongan Cabinet
His Excellency High Commissioner of Australia – Andrew Ford
Her Excellency the High Commissioner of New Zealand to Tonga - Sarah Walsh
Rev. Tevita Ngungutau Tapueluelu, FWC of Tonga, Fasi-moe-afi
Distinguished Representatives and government officials
Members of the diplomatic corp
Representatives of NGO's and IGO's
Ladies and Gentlemen

Malo e lelei

May I extend warm greetings to you all on behalf of SPREP

Welcome everybody to this very special conference on Whales in a Changing Ocean and thank you all so much for coming. SPREP is delighted with the attendance here today, and I want to start by sincerely thanking the Government of Tonga for hosting this conference and for all the excellent arrangements that have been made.

Let me also take this opportunity to thank our partners the Government of Tonga and Auckland Institute of Studies, our numerous sponsors and supporters whose generosity has made it possible for SPREP to support the travel of so many of our Members and the impressive number of expert participants. I should especially like to acknowledge the very significant contributions made by the Governments of Sweden, Australia and New Zealand, the European Union and the Okeanos Foundation.

This meeting has been over a year in the preparation, and I hope that the effort that has been put into its organisation will pay dividends for all of us. After this morning's statements by the Government of Tonga, it is clear to me that we are going to have a very informative and innovative meeting, with significant outcomes for the region.

As many of you will know, this is the Year of the Whale in the SPREP region, and we have good reasons to celebrate whales. Whales are awe-inspiring creatures that have had a central place in Pacific islands cultures for centuries and our region is home to over half the species of whales and dolphins on Planet Earth.

But their very size and predictable migrations made the great whales a target for industrialised whaling fleets last century, and over 2 million large whales were killed on their Antarctic feeding grounds, driving the whales that overwintered in the Pacific islands close to extinction. Over 30 years ago, as the global Save The Whale campaign gathered strength, SPREP members were in the forefront of declaring national whale sanctuaries, which now cover over 12 million square kilometres of our region, and this morning we will hear that Tonga will be declaring its waters, which are home to the largest breeding population of humpbacks in our region, a whale sanctuary. Congratulations Tonga!

Whale populations are now slowly recovering, none more so than in Tonga. Since the far-sighted King Tupou IV issued a Royal Decree to halt subsistence whaling in Tonga in 1978, the population of humpback whales breeding in Tongan waters every winter has grown from an estimated 50 or so to over 3,000. It is one of the world's great conservation success stories.

And with the population recovery have come economic opportunities for Tonga and other Pacific island countries in the form of whale-watching. The United Nations has declared 2017 as the Year of Sustainable Tourism, and it is highly appropriate that an important theme of this conference should be developing best practice whale-watching operations in the Pacific islands, and I understand that we have some of the best people in the world here to proffer their advice.

But although most whales are now safe from the harpoon, they now face an array of new emerging threats such as climate change, marine debris and pollution, noise, entanglement and by-catch in fishing gear. A fundamental theme of SPREP's Year of the Whale is that whales are ocean sentinels – because they are long-lived, they become living indicators of the health of our seas. And what happens to whales from living in a polluted ocean will surely soon happen also to Pacific islanders. By looking after our oceans to protect our whales, we also look after ourselves and future generations of both whales and people.

SPREP attempts to provide guidance on the conservation of whales for all our Members through our Whale and Dolphin Action Plan, which is due for renewal this year, to cover the period 2018-2023. This conference will be the starting point for our new plan, and we are looking to all of you – governments, scientists, NGOs, civil society and the private sector – to assist us in this endeavour. Your deliberations over the next two and a half days will provide the framework and the platform for whale conservation in the region over the next 5 years.

Most of you will be aware that this is a big year for oceans on the global stage, with the UN Ocean conference in New York in June, which is co-hosted by Sweden, one of our major sponsors for this meeting, and Fiji. We intend to take the outcomes of this conference to the UN meeting in various ways, most importantly through a Declaration that we hope governments here will sign onto. We also have some other ideas, and you'll hear more about them later.

And we won't be short of entertainment – the Tongan Government will be hosting a reception this evening; there will be a film evening tomorrow night, and SPREP will host a farewell reception on Thursday evening. So, I invite you to work hard, to enjoy yourselves, and to get to know each other. It is my hope that this conference will usher in a new era of collaboration between countries, with the active participation of many of the organisations in the room, to provide a secure future for our Ocean Voyagers, the Pacific whales.

Thank you again Honourable Deputy Prime Minister for your outstanding Tongan hospitality. Thank you Ministers, officials and participants for coming to Whales in a Changing Ocean and I look forward to meeting you all in the course of the next few days.