

Remarks by Ambassador Peter Thomson, United Nations Secretary-General's Special Envoy for the Ocean at Meeting of the Parties to the Water Convention, High-level Segment: Special Session – Water and Peace, accelerating progress on transboundary water cooperation to achieve sustainable development; Geneva/Online, 29 September 2021

Excellencies,
Ladies and Gentlemen

Warm greetings and thank you for the privilege of addressing you today.

As the UN Secretary-General's Special Envoy on the Ocean, I would like to speak on the connections between the freshwater and saltwater ecosystems, the so-called hydrological cycle. But in so doing, I first couch my words within the context of our times.

Recent reports of the IPCC, IPBES and the WMO confirm what we've known for some time now, that we are dangerously off course in our struggle to control anthropogenically-created global warming, thereby creating great uncertainties for the security of our grandchildren and theirs'. As a result, Secretary-General Antonio Guterres has declared a "red alert for humanity", and I suggest we should be treating our discussions today fully within the implications arising from that alert.

The Secretary-General has also stated that humanity has been at war with Nature and that it is time for us to make peace. Here I make two points. Firstly, water has been a casualty of that war. And secondly, the vast majority of water on the planet is contained in the Ocean and as a result of human activities, the Ocean's health is measurably

in decline, be it by way of warming, habitat destruction, over-fishing or pollution.

We ignore this decline at our peril, for climate results primarily from the interaction of the atmosphere and the Ocean. Thus changes to the hydrological cycle can be expected and are already occurring in the form of droughts, torrential rains, and tropical storms.

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The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development affirms the integrated nature of its 17 Sustainable Development Goals. In this regard, many SDG6 targets will not be achieved without meeting the SDG14 targets, and vice versa. Therefore, collaborative actions are necessary if these goals are to be met.

The Water Convention emphasizes national and international measures to abate pollution of the marine environment, in particular coastal areas, from land-based sources. Meanwhile, the Watercourses Convention also aims to protect and preserve the marine environment. These conventions can be trusted conduits in our efforts to make peace with Nature.

Let us then consider the urgent need to prevent further rampant pollution of our environment. Pollution cuts across both the freshwater and the marine ecosystems, with SDG6.3 calling for improvements to water quality and wastewater treatment, and SDG14.1 demanding reduction of marine pollution, in particular from land-based activities.

Every year, tens of millions of tons of plastic waste enter the Ocean from land sources passing through rivers and waterways. Evidence shows that this problem will continue to grow unless urgent decisive action is taken, thus all speed and robustness must be applied to

enacting the proposed global treaty on prevention of plastic pollution.

Let us also consider that globally over 80% of wastewater is discharged without adequate treatment, causing ecological damage, health risks, and economic loss. Most of this pollution load comes from municipal, industrial and agricultural waste and run-off; and so, in the cause of peace, it's time for the Climate Finance needle to be moved decisively in the direction of fixing this major threat to the freshwater and marine environment.

Ecosystem protection is a shared concern of SDGs 6 and 14, with SDG6.6 seeking to protect and restore water-related ecosystems, and SDG14.2 endeavoring to protect and restore marine and coastal ecosystems. Here I trumpet the cause of protecting and restoring coastal wetlands and mangroves.

Wetlands and mangroves provide multiple ecosystem services, including control of nutrients and sediment entering the marine environment, breeding sites for birds and fish, and protection of coastal communities from water-related disasters. However, natural wetlands have declined by around 30% worldwide since 1970 and mangrove areas have decreased by about 4% globally for the past two decades. It is time for the world to fully recognize that ecosystems support human societies and that we must now put an end to further habitat destruction.

Another important element in our drive for peace is that management of both water and marine resources must be ruled by the principle of sustainability. Here we should note that SDG6.5 calls for implementation of Integrated Water Resources Management, while SDG14.7 points to increasing the economic benefits from sustainable use of marine resources. A further positive note is that in coastal areas, Integrated Coastal Management takes the same

systemic approach as Integrated Water Resources Management to the sustainable management of the coastal environment.

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In closing, I underline that the United Nations provides platforms to facilitate dialogues between the freshwater and saltwater communities. For instance, the High-Level Symposium on Water will be organized during the United Nations Ocean Conference being held from 27 June to 1 July in Lisbon next year. The Symposium is expected to provide valuable input to the United Nations Water Conference in 2023 on the mid-term comprehensive review of the Water Action Decade.

I look forward to meeting many of you in Lisbon next year and to assisting further collaboration among the freshwater and saltwater communities. I thank you for your attention.
