



“Healthy Oceans and Seas: a Way Forward”

Address to the United Nations

4 February 2014

Excellencies, ladies, and gentlemen:

Palau is home to some of the world's most scenic islands, lakes, and reefs, and some of the world's greatest biodiversity, including 1,300 species of fish and 700 species of coral.

Our people have long understood that they are the stewards of this rich endowment, and that Palau's past, present, and future are tied to the health of our natural environment - particularly our oceans.

Local chiefs did not know the science of their environment, but they lived in harmony with their surroundings. They understood that the people's health and prosperity rose and fell with the ocean's tides. When resources became scarce, they declared a "Bul" - what we might today refer to as a moratorium. Reefs would be deemed off limits during spawning and feeding periods so that the ecosystem could replenish itself and fish stocks would remain abundant. Certain areas, like Ngirukuwid, were given permanent protection because of their important biodiversity. The goal was not conservation for its own sake, but to restore the balance between people and nature. The best science now confirms that our approach to managing the oceans is sound.

The traditional ethos of the Bul is enshrined in Palauan law: Article 6 of Palau's Constitution requires Palau's government to "take positive action" to conserve "a beautiful, healthful and resourceful natural environment."

With this cultural and political mandate, Palau has:

- led the Micronesian Challenge to conserve at least 30% of near-shore marine resources and 20% of the terrestrial resources;
- created the Protected Areas Network, a national framework for community-based conservation;
- implemented some of the world's most stringent regulations outlawing bottom trawling; and
- created the world's first shark sanctuary.

These initiatives have helped sustain the vitality of Palau's waters. But I return again and again to a question my forebears never conceived of: how much will Palau's efforts matter if the world is not on the same page?

The international community has allowed fish stocks to plummet. Once thought to be limitless, more than 80 percent of global fish stocks are now fully or overexploited. Reckless and destructive fishing practices, overfishing, and illegal, unreported, and unregulated fishing have robbed us of our resources. They must be stopped.

Pollution is saturating our waters. The Pacific is home to a plastic gyre inconceivable in its size. Remote parts of Palau - areas uninhabited for centuries - are littered with someone else's garbage.

Ocean acidification and bleaching are decimating coral reefs and coastal habitats that once teemed with life.

Climate change is causing the seas to rise at unprecedented rates, increasing the intensity of storms.

In the last two years, two of the most powerful storms in history, Bopha and Haiyan, have decimated our shores. Haiyan displaced the entire population of our northern state of Kayangel. People from that island will not return to their homes for at least a year.

Palau is north of the Pacific typhoon belt, so we have never experienced these disasters before. We are grateful to our partners for helping to clean up and rebuild. But we know that these disasters will continue and will likely get worse. If our partners really want to help, they should reduce their Greenhouse Gas emissions and agree to an international agreement that will protect Palau's future.

Given the enormity of these threats, the need for simultaneous international and domestic action is obvious.

This week's United Nations Sustainable Development Goals Working Group meeting provides the context for what is needed internationally. Yesterday, I had the honor to speak on behalf of the Pacific Small Island Developing States at the Working Group's meeting on oceans. The PSIDS are leading the campaign for a stand alone Sustainable Development Goal on healthy, productive, and resilient oceans and seas. As a group, we have called on the international community to recognize the central role of oceans and seas in nature, and to providing food, jobs, health, and culture.

The Millennium Development Goals proved that we can make historic gains by marshaling resources around a common cause and bringing stakeholders – governments, NGOs, the private sector, and local communities – together. Even the most cynical among us must marvel at the millions that were educated, vaccinated, and raised out of poverty as a result of the MDGs. The same should be true for the SDGs and oceans.

Investments in sustainable ecotourism, local fisheries, marine management, data collection, and monitoring, control, and surveillance of our waters can make a generational, transformative impact. We require only the right tools and the right partnerships to protect our environment, grow our economies, and enrich our people's lives. A stand-alone SDG is the best way to tackle the interconnected issues of the oceans environment and our best chance to align all stakeholders to make progress on the commitments the international community has already made.

Until the international community can agree on a holistic SDG-type framework and implement programs to reverse the devastation to our oceans and seas, I will work to close Palau's waters to commercial fishing.

Make no mistake, this is not an effort to lock up Palau's waters and throw away the key. Like a Bul, ending commercial fishing will give nature a chance to heal from what the scientists are telling us is the damage caused by the intensive fishing pressures. It will also release the vast potential of our waters to provide more food for our people, more fish for the region, and to grow Palau's economy.

These objectives - environmental health, food security, and economic growth - are the very essence of Sustainable Development.

You might wonder how closing our waters to lucrative commercial fishing will help Palau's economy grow. The answer is simple: Palau's economic potential lies in tourism, not tuna. Tourism, in fact, already provides more than half of our GDP, and it depends upon our pristine marine environment.

Palau's homes and villages are beautiful places, but it is our pristine reefs, our sharks, our Rock Islands, and our beaches that more than 100,000 tourists a year come to experience. If we can grow that sector sustainably, we can replace lost income from fishing while preserving the marine environment, which is our heritage.

What we need are the right partners to help make this Bul effective and enforceable. Many of you are in this room today.

We hope to access technology to monitor illegal vessels in our waters. And we need to measure the rising tides so that we can prepare for and respond to extreme weather, and avoid disaster when the coming storms pass through. This technology exists I am eager to learn more about how it works. For it is only by taking control of our territory and our sovereignty that we can ensure that generations more of Palauans can preserve their heritage and enjoy the natural bounty provided to us.

Thank you.