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Statement for Bahamas SIDS ten-year review of The Barbados Programme of Action

The Bahamas is a 100,000 sq. mile archipelago that extends over 500 miles north to south and east to west occupying some of the clearest ocean water in the world. Our 700 islands and 2,400 cays many of which are uninhabited, total an estimated land area of 5,382 sq. miles. The highest land elevation in The Bahamas is 206 feet, making our archipelagic nation one of the most vulnerable Small Island Developing States in the region to climate change and national disasters such as hurricanes.

The Bahamas presently has 25 national parks, spread throughout the country and ranging in size from a few acres to several hundred thousand acres and encompassing every kind of habitat that the archipelago possesses. The Bahamas already has some experience with Marine Protected Areas as 12 of these 25 national parks include marine areas, largest of which is the Exuma Cays Land & Sea Park, a 176 square mile area established in 1958, which allowed limited fishing within the boundaries of the park until 1986. At that time it was determined that a complete ban on fishing in the protected area was necessary. Today the Exuma Cays Land and Sea Park provides testimony of the wisdom of that decision. Scientific research and casual observations demonstrate that the fish are larger and more abundant within the Park when compared to areas outside. The spillover effect is apparent in adjacent areas and fish diversity is greatly increased inside the boundaries of the park.

As successful as the Exuma Cays Land and Sea Park and other areas under The Bahamas National Trust system have been, these areas alone cannot do what is needed to maintain the sustainability of the marine ecosystems and lucrative commercial fishing industry of The Bahamas. Long-term protection of our valuable marine resources absolutely requires the development of a network of fully protected Marine Reserves. It is envisioned that the network must be large enough to adequately represent the many different habitats found in our islands, and distributed so as to maintain vital linkages for all life-stages of marine animal and plant life as they move through their full life cycles. Reserves must also be numerous enough and sufficiently dispersed so as to provide adequate replication as insurance against damage from local environmental catastrophes, such as hurricanes.

Building on this experience, The Bahamas Department of Fisheries working in close consultation with local and international partners proposed the establishment of a network of No Take Marine Reserves throughout The Bahamas. Having reviewed a large number of possible locations throughout our archipelagic nation, in January 2000, the government established the first five No Take Marine Reserve sites.

These areas are rich in biodiversity and represent some of the healthiest marine ecosystems found in The Bahamas and consist of representative habitats necessary for the complete life cycle development of most commercially important fishery species. Since 2000, the Department of Fisheries has been working conscientiously on details with respect to exactly where the boundaries will be established, what the governing legal framework will be, and development of assessment, management and monitoring plans. Considerable time investment had been made conducting inventories and baseline data surveys within proposed boundaries and careful consideration is being given with regard to creative ways to assist displaced fishermen. Provision of economic sustainability has been high on the agenda, and a plan for placement of ReefBalls or other artificial reef structures are being studied as potential ways to enhance fish biomass in areas outside of proposed marine reserve boundaries so that displaced fishermen would still be

able to obtain reasonable catches in spite of the fact that their traditional fishing areas are being closed to fishing.

Momentum for this initiative has been maintained with full community participation and a comprehensive consultative process run by both government and NGO partners. This stakeholder outreach and participation has sparked even greater interest from communities in areas with no immediate plans for the establishment of marine reserves. Along with seasonal closures for individual species like the Nassau Grouper and Spiny Lobster, it is hoped that eventually The Bahamas will have at least 20% of its productive bank areas set aside as marine protected areas.

In furthering the implementation of the 1994 Barbados Programme of Action, The Bahamas has also taken the following actions:

- Signed the RAMSAR Convention in June 1997
- Expanded the National Park system by more than doubling the inventory of national protected areas April 2002,
- Worked with The Bahamas National Trust, The Nature Conservancy and other partners to develop a management plan for the Exuma Cays Land & Sea Park, which began in March 2003 and is currently ongoing
- Effectuated a seasonal closure for commercially important fish species – Nassau Grouper in December 2003 and 2004
- Created the Clifton Heritage Trust – 200 acres plus protected in June 2004
- Signed a National Implementation Support Partnership in November 2004

The Bahamas Government particularly through the recent signing of the National Implementation Support Partnership (NISP) agreement is committed to advancing the Marine and Coastal Protected Areas of our country.