

**Kofi Annan**  
**Secretary-General of the United Nations**

President Michel  
Vice-President Chin  
Mr Rammell  
Excellencies  
Ladies and Gentlemen,

It gives me great pleasure to join you for this important event. Let me thank the Governments of the Seychelles and the United Kingdom, as well as their many NGO partners, for their initiative in drawing much needed attention to the fate of coral reefs, island communities and the marine environment in general.

For too long, the world acted as if the oceans were somehow a realm apart – as areas owned by none, free for all, with little need for care or management. The Law of the Sea Convention and other landmark legal instruments have brought important progress over the past two decades in protecting fisheries and marine ecosystems. But this common heritage of all mankind continues to face profound pressures. About 40 percent of the world's people now live within 60 kilometres of the coast, and coastal mega-cities continue to grow.

Reefs in particular are both especially vulnerable and especially important. Roughly a quarter of the world's coral reefs have been badly degraded or destroyed in the last several decades. Though they make up less than half of one percent of the ocean floor, more than 90% of marine species are directly or indirectly dependent on them. Reefs are also essential for nutrition, for livelihoods and for economic growth.

Some estimates suggest that the world's coral reefs generate nearly \$30 billion each year from living resources, fish, souvenir manufacturing, mining, tourism, bioprospecting for new products, and coastal protection from erosion, waves and storm damage. For small islands and low-lying areas, reefs are nature's crucial defences against aggressive and destructive seas.

That makes reefs vital life support systems for us all, and therefore essential to protect. We need early warning systems, but reducing vulnerability must begin with conserving coral reefs and mangroves. Yet to date, our attention has been focussed primarily on land. The number of protected areas around the world has risen to more than 100,000. But less than one percent of the world oceans are protected, compared to twelve percent of the land area.

So there is so much to do. The threats are diverse. We see land-based pollution that has created oxygen-starved "dead zones" in the oceans and seas. We see oil spills, destructive and unsustainable fishing methods, and of course natural disasters such as the tsunami that just struck the Indian Ocean with such force.

Climate change threatens further destruction of reefs, and major disruptions of island and coastal economies. There is still inadequate commitment to the precautionary approach to environmental challenges. And there is an urgent need to involve local communities and other stakeholders more actively in decision making processes.

The Millennium Development Goals call on us to eradicate hunger, to ensure environmental sustainability, to reverse the loss of environmental resources, and to reduce the proportion of people without access to safe water and sanitation. Efforts to achieve these goals will have a

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direct bearing on the fate of the seas and marine resources. The Millennium Project will report on Monday on what it will take to achieve these goals.

The World Summit on Sustainable Development called for the establishment of a global network of marine protected areas by the year 2012. We must do more to make this happen, and ensure that we do not simply create token havens with no effective enforcement, while exploitation goes on elsewhere.

We have a vision. We have agreed goals. We have great knowledge and ever-greener technologies. What we need is high-level political commitment for marine conservation and protection areas. I assure you that the United Nations system shares your strong devotion to this effort.

If at one time what happened on and beneath the seas was 'out of sight, out of mind, that can no longer be the case. Let us work together: to protect the oceans and coastal zones; to help small islands survive and prosper; and to ensure that all people enjoy a sustainable future.

Thank you very much.