



**RESPONSIBLE FISHERIES
AND THE FUTURE OF THE OCEANS**

**A Speech
by
the President of Iceland
Ólafur Ragnar Grímsson
at a luncheon meeting on
'The Evolution of Sustainability and the Role of Choice'
The European Seafood Exposition 2012
Brussels
24 April 2012**

Ladies and gentlemen

It is a great pleasure to join this Iceland-Alaska forum on responsible fisheries, especially in the light of my long-standing cooperation with Alaska, initiated by my good friend, the late Governor Hickel, a unique and inspiring visionary.

Last year, when attending a conference on the Arctic in Alaska, I had a constructive meeting with the present Governor, Parnell; and a few weeks ago, I sat down in Boston with my old friend Mead Treadwell, the Lieutenant Governor of Alaska, to plan further developments in our cooperation.

Thus, the meeting here today fits excellently within the broad framework of Alaska-Icelandic cooperation which many of us have now been promoting for almost a decade.

In the early years of my Presidency I was privileged to host the great explorer Thor Heyerdahl, of *Kon-Tiki* fame, who, with his vision, had been a hero to young boys growing up in the fishing villages of the Icelandic Western Fjords. In old age he had become frustrated at the lack of research into the extraordinary universe beneath the surface of the

oceans, and was angry about the reckless exploitation of marine resources.

“We know less about the oceans than we know about the Moon,” was his startling statement. At first I thought this was an exaggeration by a disappointed man but soon had the truth of what he said confirmed by others.

More than a decade has now passed, and science has certainly progressed, but it probably still remains true that the race started by President Kennedy and Khrushchev half a century ago raised greater resources for space exploration than have been available for the combined effort to understand the nature of the world’s oceans.

Thus, the premise of our dialogue must be the humble acknowledgement that we are still in the early stages of understanding the forces which dominate the seas and determine their future, the laws which govern the harmony between the different species and the balance which must prevail among the various bio-systems based in the salty waters. Therefore, it is of the utmost importance to develop and maintain sustainable fisheries and make sure that products sold in the market are subject to active controls and codes of conduct.

Our common knowledge is so limited that the oceans must always be given the benefit of the doubt and economic utilisation must rest on sound scientific recommendations – otherwise we will risk destroying what to future generations will be the essence of their inheritance.

The history of my small nation, which for centuries has sustained itself on the resources of the ocean, is in many ways a vivid illustration of the message I wish to convey. When the Republic was established in 1944, our economic pillars were still weak. Foreign fishing fleets, from Britain, Germany, France and other European countries made their catches freely right up to our shores. Thus, the need for the expansion of our Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ), first to 12 miles, then to 50 and finally to 200 nautical miles, was a direct continuation of our successful campaign for the establishment of the Republic, and the nation became deeply aware of its responsibility to preserve the resources of the ocean.

For decades the Marine Research Institute has by law played a key role in determining the annual catch of various species and the authority to close areas when the protection of spawning fish so requires. At first, some politicians and local community leaders, and of course many fishermen, were not ready to accept its recommendations, believing that their own instinct was a better guide, but gradually our annual fisheries catches have become firmly based on scientific recommendations.

To strengthen this system we developed, in the 1980s, a comprehensive regime of catch quotas for every vessel, making them transferable from the 1990s. Although this system certainly has some faults and is still hotly debated in my country – with arguments over how much should be the financial return to the nation from granting the use of a common resource and how commercially-based transfers by individual companies can affect the future of fishing communities – the result has been that Iceland is probably the country in Europe that has in recent years succeeded best in maintaining its fish stocks at sustainable levels while making its fishing companies economically stronger and more profitable.

The scientifically-based quota system is also one of the reasons why Iceland has come out of the 2008 financial crisis earlier and more effectively than anyone expected, demonstrating a clear correlation between such a sustainable fishing regime and recovery from a severe banking collapse!

Due to its significance for our economy, the fishing sector has furthermore served as the basis for technological innovations by a multitude of engineering and IT companies, opening for them routes to global success. Thus Marel which grew out of a cooperative venture between the University of Iceland and a few fishing companies, has become a major world player in the production of food processing machinery. Its products are now used by major fish and meat producers in the US, Latin America, Europe, Russia and Asia. In the same way, 3X-Technology in my small home town of Isafjordur, with about 2,600 inhabitants, now produces processing machines for both Thailand and China.

I could give many other examples of how an enlightened and responsible fishing sector can foster successful IT and other high-tech companies. Here in Brussels we can see many examples of how this creative relationship has led both to innovation and fascinating enterprises. But let me conclude by briefly describing two innovations developed in Iceland which I believe could, if they were introduced in international law or agreements, lead to a major steps towards responsible global fisheries.

First, there are the small automatic tracking devices, some costing only about 200-500 USD, which for years have been obligatory instruments on every Icelandic vessel, large and small. They send signals to satellites or other receivers, enabling the authorities to monitor where each vessel is at all times. This creates a continuous record of vessel movements, supports rescue efforts and enables companies to assemble

data on the basis of which they can organise their fleet in a more profitable way.

I have on numerous occasions taken Presidents and other foreign leaders visiting Iceland to the company Vísir in Grindavík, close to the Blue Lagoon. There they have been able to see demonstrations of the use of this system for effective management of the fishing fleet and fish processing. Then I have proudly added that Vísir also operates in Thingeyri, a village in the West Fjords where I grew up as a kid with my grandparents.

All nations are linked to a strict international regime which obliges every aeroplane that takes off, whether large or small, to meet specific technical requirements. I believe we should similarly negotiate international agreements aimed at bringing tracking instruments into every vessel in the world, and thus establish the foundation on which a global system of responsible and safe fisheries can be firmly developed. In a few weeks a delegation from Google will come to Iceland at my invitation to examine this Icelandic system and study its significance for global applications.

The second innovation is to utilise commercial stripe marking, the bar-code labelling we all know from our everyday shopping, by putting it on every piece of fish product sold anywhere in the world. Icelandic companies have a well-established practice of using such bar-codes in both the European and US markets, indicating the vessel that caught the fish, the processing factory and even the individuals who handled the fish on its way from the ocean to the consumer.

In addition, as we all know, Icelandic companies have striven for the conservation and sustainable use of marine resources by using the FAO Code of Conduct and FAO Guidelines for Eco-labelling of Fish and Fishery Products as the basis for certifying responsible fisheries management in Icelandic waters.

We now have the technological ability to allow buyers of fish, whether in Waitrose in London or Whole Foods in New York, to check on their Blackberries or iPhones the names of every crew member of the boat that caught the fish, where exactly it was located, how the fish came out of the ocean and pictures of the proud workers in the processing plant.

By making these and other IT innovations obligatory world-wide through international agreements and by utilising tools like Google Earth, important contributions could be made towards responsible management of the ocean resources.

There is no reason why other countries cannot adopt the computerized system which the Icelandic Directorate of Fisheries has developed in cooperation with our innovative IT companies like TrackWell. It allows the Directorate to have up-to-date information on the catch of each vessel, classified by species, port of landing, the fishing gear used, the fishing grounds and the buyers of the catch. This information is then immediately put on the Directorate's website and updated every six hours, so competing fishing companies can simultaneously check on each other and everybody else anywhere in the world can access their performance in a transparent way.

The nexus between IT and responsible fisheries is probably our best hope of reform, but let us also remember that the success of the Law of the Sea remains a profound proof of how the nations of the world can indeed unite in a common action.

The development of sustainable fisheries has been a fascinating learning journey for my nation. The results and the success are on display here in Brussels and it is both a privilege and a pleasure to be with you here today.

Alaska and Iceland have a lot to contribute to the global dialogue on responsible fisheries. Together we can help to move the world towards a more sustainable future. I wish you well and will follow your progress with great interest.