



**Keynote Address**  
**by**  
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**President of Iceland**  
**at the FAO Ministerial Meeting**  
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Mr. Director General Dr. Jacques Diouf  
Honourable Ministers  
Distinguished delegates

The majesty and the mystery of the oceans has inspired civilisations to bring new visions to our existence and to explore the unknown with bold determination.

In ancient times the sea defined the boundaries of the world, and still, despite great discoveries which this century have taken man to the Moon and brought us towards the genetic essence of our own being, the oceans retain their mythical aura.

In the poetic words of Auden the sea is “the alpha of existence” and to Thomas Mann it provided “the experience of eternity”. Great thinkers and artists of all times have in their thoughts, poems, paintings and musical fantasies given us glorious visions of the seas and profound interpretations of the boundless forces and the ever-changing beauty of the oceans.

It is indeed a paradox how little attention this dominant feature of life on Earth has been given in modern times by the scientific and technological communities which have revolutionized mankind’s existence, and how reluctant global and regional institutions have been to deal with the challenges posed by successful management of the oceans.

The great explorer Thor Heyerdahl of Kon Tiki fame has stated that the direction of scientific research in recent decades has been such that mankind now knows far less about the oceans than about the Moon.

Why should we be satisfied with leaving the exploration of the seas to the intellectual domains of artists and poets? Has the time not arrived to dedicate the powers of science, discovery and global co-operation towards making an effort on behalf of humankind with respect to the oceans, on the scale which in previous decades has been devoted to exploring space?

The international community faces in the 21<sup>st</sup> century the monumental tasks of how to obtain the necessary knowledge regarding the nature of the oceans, and how to conclude multilateral agreements in order to preserve the ocean resources in a responsible way.

Fish stocks could with proper management become an ever more important part of the Earth's food supply. Sustainability of fish stocks must therefore become a fundamental part of the global food strategy for the new century.

I therefore applaud the decision by the leadership of FAO to initiate a Ministerial Meeting to discuss the implementation of the Code of Conduct for Responsible Fisheries, and I am deeply moved by the honour shown to my country in inviting me to address you at this opening session.

By such an invitation FAO is perhaps recognising the example provided by the tough but successful struggle of my small nation; a nation which has survived in the northernmost part of the Atlantic for more than a thousand years and attained both national sovereignty and general material wellbeing primarily through our management of the ocean resources. If we had failed in that respect, we would not only have lost our potential for economic and social growth but also our independence and sovereign status among nations. Indeed, the stakes for us have been enormous.

Effective management of the ocean resources has provided us in Iceland with one of the highest per capita incomes in the world, at nearly 25,000 USD; a life expectancy which is among the highest anywhere, and such a degree of equality in living standards and availability of education and health services that all families – in rural areas and fishing villages as well as in the main urban areas – are offered the same opportunities and access.

In examining this achievement, which is primarily based on responsible fisheries, it tends to be forgotten that until a few decades ago the Icelanders were primarily a nation of very poor farmers and fishermen who for more than a thousand years had fought food shortages, poverty, hardship and the destructive forces of nature. Plagues and natural

disasters had often taken a severe toll and the population remained very low as a result.

Every generation of Icelanders, up to and including the generation of my own grandparents, knew food shortages, even at times hunger. My parents were familiar in their youth with the struggle to maintain an adequate store of food throughout the hard winter. In my own childhood, staying with my grandparents in a small fishing village of 300 – 400 people in north-western Iceland, I helped with drying the fish, harvesting potatoes, and smoking and salting the meat to make sure the family had enough provisions of food to last through the dark winter months.

The history of my nation in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century can serve as a lesson in how to transform a community of poor farmers and fishermen into one of the most affluent, high-tech oriented societies in the world, how resources from fishing were used to build the foundations for economic progress and social welfare. The odds against this success, the odds created by the tough terrain, glaciers, volcanoes, deserts, lava fields and the merciless storms of the cold North Atlantic Ocean, were certainly formidable.

I believe that our history in Iceland can offer some important lessons and guidelines for the development of fishing communities in other parts of the world. Although conditions are different everywhere there is sufficient universality in the course of such development to offer frameworks of wisdom and general principles.

Furthermore, a small country is often a suitable field to examine the interactions of crucial factors. It is closer to being a laboratory situation, a model to be studied, than the larger nations and states where the boundaries of bureaucracy and the complexities of external factors make it difficult to reach fundamental conclusions. We have in recent years been pleased to welcome officials and specialists from Asia, Latin America and Africa who have decided to test their own views and strategies for development by examining the Icelandic experience.

The emphasis on preserving the fish stocks and on controlling the utilisation of ocean resources in a responsible way is of primary importance to the Icelandic nation. The advice of marine scientists and the quotas formally recommended by the Marine Research Institute have always been the foundation of government policy. Long-term sustainability of natural resources has been as important to the Icelandic nation as sovereignty itself. Every Icelander knows that without preserving the

natural resources of the ocean, the nation would not survive. Responsible ecological management and sustainable use of ocean resources are as fundamental as our own political independence.

The pride taken in the quality of the fish has been ingrained in our culture and also in the marketing and technological development of the fishing sector. To fail to fulfil the strictest quality standards is presented both as a national and a personal disgrace. So advanced has this obsession with quality become in modern times that if, for example, an American or an Asian consumer buys Icelandic cod or shrimp products in his or her local supermarket and finds the quality lacking, that specific product can be traced to the plant of origin in an Icelandic fishing village and also to the specific worker who initially handled it.

Education, primary and advanced, has always been an essential pillar of our social and economic development. Although the farmers and fishermen were in earlier times poor and hard working, all of them could read and write. Thus the distribution of technical knowledge and new skills was made easier in the early part of this century. We have followed this educational tradition in modern times by creating special programmes of education directed at the fishermen and the people who work in fish processing.

Although Iceland has, like all countries, special characteristics to some degree, I believe our experience offers important lessons for the development of fishing sectors in other parts of the world, lessons of how to achieve economic progress, prosperity and welfare based on balanced use of the ocean resources.

Bearing in mind the image of the Nordic countries today, you could argue that it has been easy for us to achieve our high standard of living. But may I remind you again, that just a generation or two ago the Icelandic nation consisted primarily of poor farmers and fishermen who mostly lived in rural areas and small coastal villages with less than 1,000 inhabitants each; only a few towns numbered a little more.

The forces of nature had over the centuries been a tough and merciless master, demanding sacrifices and regularly offering a spectrum of natural disasters, volcanic eruptions and destructive storms. When judging from afar the conditions for living in Iceland, many people wonder that anything actually survives there at all. I have often had great difficulties in convincing some of my Indian friends that on arrival they would not be transformed to pillars of ice.

It is quite possible to take the view that if such a success can be achieved in Iceland, there are not many areas in the world where progressive and responsible development of ocean resources cannot take place.

We are probably the only developed nation which has succeeded in building a highly profitable market-oriented fishing industry without destroying the fish stocks and without a system of state subsidies. The absolute emphasis on sustaining the fish stocks and the guiding role of global market orientation are the two fundamental pillars of the Icelandic success story.

We have consistently advocated responsible stock management and tried to lead other nations in that direction. Our primary argument during the Law of the Sea process and in the campaign for the recognition of the 200 mile economic zone was that these international regimes were prerequisites for preserving the ocean resources.

The importance of scientific knowledge, research by marine biologists and formal advice from respected ocean research institutions must be the firm basis of both international and national policy-making. The system of quota controls must furthermore be economically viable, and based on sound market premises and solid principles of economic growth. All elements of national and international fishing regimes and control systems must also be based on mutual confidence, transparency and the most advanced systems for gathering information.

At the opening of this Ministerial Meeting I want to emphasise five conditions which are especially important with respect to international fishing and oceanic co-operation and management.

1. Priority must be given to concluding multilateral – and in particular regional – agreements on preserving those fish stocks which go beyond the national boundaries of the 200 mile economic zones. It is of utmost importance to build up the stocks that pass through international waters.
2. The most important step towards responsible fishing is to abolish the various systems of state subsidies to the fishing sector which exist in both developed and developing countries. No other single action could bring such positive results in a short time towards achieving sustainable developments in fisheries. There is, for example, a direct correlation between the excess capacity of fishing fleets and the volume of state subsidies. The elimination

of government subsidies is therefore the key to success. Our nations are now quite capable of catching all the fish which it is sensible to catch without the existing systems of subsidies. The abolition of government subsidies could therefore be a specific topic in the next round of WTO negotiations.

3. Surveillance of fishing, both in national and international waters, must be increased. International organisations should receive sufficient and detailed information on all fishing which takes place in the respective regions of the world. It is now possible through satellite and computer technologies to make data on the catches and the location of individual vessels, large and small, available at all centres where information is gathered. Such an open data system would ensure transparency and build trust not only among the member states but especially within the fishing communities – and let us not forget that the co-operation of fishermen is an essential ingredient for success.
4. An important contribution towards progress would be to establish a global system of free trade in fish and fish products, and to abolish import quotas, custom duties and technical obstacles to trade. These matters are also important tasks for the next round of WTO negotiations.
5. The best way to secure the interests and wellbeing of fish consumers, and likewise maintain high prices of fish products, would be to introduce throughout the world uniform quality systems based on international standards such as Codex Alimentarius.

Within this fivefold framework and in the light of the urgent need to give ocean food resources fundamental priority in the 21<sup>st</sup> century it is important to strengthen FAO's role even further, especially with respect to three areas of global co-operation:

- ?? Priority has to be given to more systematic information gathering and scientific research in all areas related to the oceans, in fisheries, fish processing and marketing as well as fisheries governance. FAO is uniquely placed to integrate such efforts.
- ?? It is important to make lessons of success available to others, to train officials and technical staff, to inform policy makers and political leaders. In this respect FAO can be the key facilitator

and co-ordinator and could for this purpose make use of global data banks and multimedia technologies.

?? More agreements, treaties and codes of conduct must be negotiated and approved. To initiate and further such results, no other institution is as well placed as FAO.

Honourable Ministers.  
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I have sought here today to illustrate my views by referring to the experience of my country. I have done so not in order to enhance its importance but simply because I believe that the concrete experience of a small nation whose existence has been defined and determined by the ocean for more than a thousand years is a better guide to deciding what works and what should be done than fancy theories or extensive and complicated memorandums. But I have also presented this approach in order to encourage all of you who represent your nations here today to seek inspiration and wisdom from your collective experience, from the nations and communities which must for the sake of their very existence treat the resources of the oceans in a responsible way.

During this important meeting you will, together with the distinguished FAO staff so excellently led by the Director General, discuss concrete proposals, ideas and suggestions on how the global community can, at the dawn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, responsibly utilise and preserve the ocean resources.

It is indeed high time for us all to demonstrate our capabilities in harvesting the oceans and manage their riches in ways which preserve the wealth of the seas for all generations to come.

In the Holy Bible we are faced with the challenging question: "What shall it profit a man, if he shall gain the whole world, and lose his own soul?" At the crossroads of the new millennium we can similarly ask how humankind will benefit from the exploration of space and the discovery of the genetic properties of life itself, if we lose control over the essential nature of the oceans, over the currents which encircle the continents and preserve our climate in a condition man can live in; and if we lose control over the great food source of the future and the vital elements of the Earth's biosystem provided by the oceans.

In greeting the new century we must resolve to give the oceans the highest priority in global co-operation and to seek in determined ways

solutions to the challenging tasks of preserving the nature and the riches of the seas.

I humbly thank you for the honour you have shown me and my country by inviting me to address you here today. I salute your efforts and dedication and wish you success in all your deliberations.

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