

It is an honor to have the opportunity to introduce the work of the Arctic Council in implementing the ambitious goals of the Johannesburg Summit in the area of the marine environment.

The Arctic Council, as many of you know, is a high level intergovernmental forum for addressing common concerns of the people of the region, as they relate to sustainable development. Its eight members are the Nordic countries, the countries of North America and Russia. In addition, six organizations representing indigenous peoples in the Arctic, commonly referred to as Permanent Participants, participate in the work of the Arctic Council, in full consultation with the member states.

Environmental issues have long been the main concern of the Arctic Council; the monitoring and assessment of pollution, climate change, biodiversity conservation, emergency preparedness and prevention, as well as the protection of the marine environment. In addition, the Arctic Council addresses the economic and social dimension of peoples' lives in the Arctic.

Ocean issues, one of the main topics of this conference, are high on the agenda of the Arctic Council, in part because of the large number of residents in the Arctic area who derive from the ocean their food and income and to some extent even their cultural identity. Also, there is growing evidence that climatic processes and industrial pressures on the marine environment are beginning to have a substantial impact in the Arctic.

The Arctic is predominantly a marine environment. The Arctic oceans cover approximately twenty thousand square kilometers - eight times the extent of the Mediterranean, for example. The marine environment of the Arctic is extremely rich in natural resources. It holds some of the world's most important commercial fishery grounds, as well as oil and gas reserves. In addition, the Arctic is integral to the world's hydrological system. Overall, Arctic oceans are of considerable importance to the world as a whole.

As a regional organization, the Arctic Council can have an important role to play in the implementation of the commitments of the Johannesburg Summit. The Council provides, for example, regional coordination and cooperation to protect the Arctic marine environment from both land- and sea-based activities, through, among other things, the

implementation of UNEP's Global Programme of Action at the regional level.

In the context of the Johannesburg commitments, I would like to draw particular attention to the Arctic Council's strategic plan for the protection of the Arctic marine environment, launched by Ministers one year ago. The new strategy is based on an integrated approach to sustainable ocean management and we are confident that this plan will contribute significantly to the implementation of targets set by the World Summit on Sustainable Development.

A three-day workshop hosted in Reykjavík last month, under the auspices of the Arctic Council, was an important milestone in this regard. The objective of the workshop was to provide a forum for exchanging information and ideas on the drivers of change and trends in ocean management.

The main drivers of change identified at the workshop include climate change and increased economic activity. Both call for an integrated, holistic approach. There was broad consensus that the ecosystem approach should be central to the Arctic marine strategy. At the same time, it was recognized that more work was needed to define how an ecosystem approach is to be implemented, given that this is a relatively new concept in natural resource management. In addition to the ecosystem approach, the precautionary approach and the polluter pays principle were referred as important elements for consideration.

One of the conclusions of the workshop was that the strategic plan should not only deal with the open seas but also with coastal zones, river catchments and other areas that are connected to the ocean ecosystem.

The aim of the Arctic strategic plan is to set priorities. Through it, we will not seek to reinvent principles, but to develop and link existing ones. Such a strategy should offer numerous opportunities. It will help us confront existing conditions, including pollution, and will provide a means to address new and emerging challenges. One example is the possible opening of new Arctic sea routes, due to melting sea ice.

The plan should enable the Arctic Council to take a leading role in the regional application of the ecosystem approach. An integrated approach would include partnerships among the different Arctic Council Working Groups, as well as with external partners. It will also provide

links to other international initiatives, such as the UNEP Regional Seas Program, the EU Marine Strategy and the London Convention.

I would not want to conclude without mentioning the one Arctic Council project that was specifically referred to in the Johannesburg Plan of Implementation, namely the Arctic Climate Impact Assessment (ACIA), due to be completed by the autumn of next year. The ACIA's goal is to examine the present and possible future impact of climate change on the environment and its living resources; on human health, and social and economic activities, as well as possible adaptations and responses.

Emerging evidence shows that the Arctic marine ecosystem is particularly vulnerable to global climate change. This is of growing concern and raises questions, among other things, about possible effects on the utilization of marine resources, global sea levels and the so-called thermohaline ocean circulation, the global conveyor-belt of the oceans that helps distribute the earth's heat.

For these reasons, not least, the Arctic marine environment needs to be seen in a global context and addressed as such. I am therefore particularly pleased to have been able to draw attention to the Arctic marine environment in the context of this conference and look forward to having more such opportunities in the future.