

All on Board : Speaking Note

Ladies and gentlemen,

After the session organised in cooperation with IFAW, I'd like to draw your attention to the launch of the "**Belgian Cetaceans Network**". That network is aimed at cooperating and sharing knowledge on cetacean protection across all existing agreements.

As Secretary of State for the North Sea, I am well aware that protecting that specific animal group **is extremely important for our sea biodiversity**, in particular for a specific life form so characteristic of our planet that mainly consists of seas and oceans.

Did you know, for instance, that as much as 2.100 animal species live in our North Sea? Between the many sandbanks – that are rare in the world – there are some absolute sea biodiversity hotspots. That's why my North Sea policy mainly focusses on **Blue Growth**: I want to stimulate and expand economic development in the Belgian part of the North Sea, but always within a sustainable framework.

Therefore, Belgium is actively participating in the different treaties and agreements also focussing on cetaceans, at both the international and the European level.

The impact on cetaceans is increasingly visible as a result of analysing the existing monitoring. Initiatives like the movie "sonic sea" that we just saw painfully illustrate it. The pressure on marine ecosystems is such that existing activities can only develop if essential environmental conditions are met.

It is necessary to bring the marine ecosystem back in balance and **guarantee its sustainability**. It is also important to realize that appropriate measures to reduce that impact are not self-evident. Marine spatial planning and the marine and maritime strategy are steps in the right direction, but achieving the announced objectives is absolutely no easy task. Recent negotiations on new fishery measures for the Belgian sea region, for instance, show that we should focus our

expectations and build on innovative techniques, so as to create an economically, socially and ecologically sustainable fishery on the long term.

The quality of the marine ecosystem mainly depends on the international context: many of the necessary measures can only produce results if an agreement is found and carried out at the international level. All actors concerned by sea activities should be involved. We will all have to follow the same path, taking into account everyone's possibilities. The knowledge and the positions adopted in the different forums have to be shared and expressed.

It is important to use the knowledge developed within the European legislative framework in a positive way to build a wider international consensus and – equally important – to assign the necessary capacity to carry out international treaties. Let me give an example of noise impact in the marine environment: I'd like to draw your attention in particular on the resolution approved last month within the framework of the "Agreement on the Conservation of Small Cetaceans in the Baltic, North East Atlantic, Irish and North Seas". Its ratification also had to take place within the framework of the "Convention on the Conservation of Migratory Species of Wild Animals" in October 2017. That resolution largely contributes to the objectives of the European marine strategy and if we translate it into the Belgian context, it very explicitly requires cooperation between the various actors. It would be important to feed back the knowledge within Ascobans and CMS to the other international and European treaties. Spreading that type of knowledge should be the objective of the Belgian Cetaceans Network and also the theme for this afternoon.

Besides, as Secretary of State for the North Sea, I also take the initiative to reinforce and develop the pioneering role of Belgium as regards marine planning in the coming years, based on three pillars:

- launching the revision and assessment process of the current plan: the current plan runs over a period of six years. As a consequence, a new plan has to be adopted by 20 March 2020. All stakeholders and the general public will be closely involved in the revision process.

- jointly participating with the North Sea countries to drawing up a plan for the whole North Sea Region: within that Interreg-project, our country will play a leading role in the navigation working group.
- developing a North Sea Vision towards 2050: we should think about the North Sea on the very long term: where do we want to be in 2050 en how can we make the most of the many opportunities? A North Sea Forum will be set up for that purpose, so as to consult and involve all stakeholders at all policy levels.

I encourage you to collaborate on those three pillars, within this network too.

Let me finish by thanking you for coming, as it shows your interest and your will to work together. Taking into account your knowledge and contribution can only create broader support and help developing more consistent and efficient measures.

I wish you a good and constructive dialog this afternoon and I look forward to the creation a **ties for a more intensive cooperation**.

Philippe De Backer

Secretary of State for the North Sea