

Speech given by Honourable Bernhard Esau, Minister of Fisheries and Marine Resources, Namibia, on behalf of His Excellency President Hifikepunye Pohamba

at

**the opening of the Global Large Marine Ecosystem Conference
Swakopmund, Namibia**

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As a host Government of the 3rd Global Large Marine Ecosystem Conference, I am delighted to be here this morning. I am particularly thrilled that an event of this magnitude is convened in Namibia and I take this opportunity to extend a heartfelt, warm welcome to you all on behalf of the government and the people of Namibia.

Namibia is one of driest countries on earth. It is flanked by the Kalahari Desert in the east, and in the west by the oldest desert in the world: the Namib Desert. Water is one of the greatest challenges we are facing and this situation is heightened by climate change and global warming. Our entire coast is influenced by the cold, northward flowing Benguela Current, which is one of most productive eastern boundary currents in the world.

The Benguela Current Large Marine Ecosystem or BCLME is endowed with abundant natural resources – both renewable and non-renewable. Offshore oil and gas production, marine diamond mining, coastal tourism, commercial fishing and shipping are some of the most important industrial activities that take place in the region. The value of the ecosystem was recently estimated to be USD 269 billion per year, but it could be even higher than that. We treasure this ecosystem because of the essential goods and services it provides for economic development, but we also recognise that we face several challenges in our endeavours to manage this LME cooperatively and in an integrated and sustainable way.

For instance, we know that, as in other regions of the world, the health and marine biodiversity of the BCLME are negatively affected by marine pollution. We also know that, in common with many other countries and regions, fisheries resources have been over-exploited in the past and, despite our best efforts, we have not been able to restore stocks of some of our most economically valuable fisheries to their former condition. Across the region we have vulnerable species and habitats that we need protect and, of course, the issue of climate change is of serious concern: it affects our ocean and its resources and also impacts terrestrial areas; the arid nature of our country makes this all the more serious.

I am pleased to report that the government of Namibia has taken some important strides towards addressing some of these pressing environmental issues. For example, in line with the Johannesburg Plan of Action, we have invested substantial

resources to rebuild our fish stocks so that, in time, we may restore stocks to levels that can produce maximum sustainable yields. We have adopted an ecosystem approach to fisheries management and implemented responsible fishing practices such as reducing by-catch, discards, and other adverse ecosystem impacts of fisheries. Most fish stocks in Namibia are now managed by comprehensive management plans and our country has invested heavily in monitoring, control and surveillance (including patrol and inspection from the air, land and sea) to ensure that there is no illegal fishing in our waters.

In the context of biodiversity, we have instituted marine protected areas to conserve vulnerable habitats and sensitive areas and we have declared one of the largest Marine Protected Area in Africa, measuring 956 000 hectares of ocean space. The purpose of this offshore MPA is to improve the conservation status of vulnerable species, preserve ecosystem health and function and fulfil our commitments and obligations to the World Summit of Sustainable Development and the Convention of Biological Diversity.

These endeavours by Namibia (and I have mentioned only a few) have taken place against the backdrop of a profound regional effort to address the major transboundary problems that threaten the health of the BCLME. In fact, collaboration with our neighbours -- Angola and South Africa -- began as early as the mid-1990's, when marine scientists first began working together. Later, their efforts to collaborate were formalized and entrenched by the BENEFIT and BCLME programmes.

After nearly two decades of successful collaboration, the three countries decided to put in place a binding convention with a mandate to promote the long-term conservation, protection, rehabilitation, enhancement and sustainable use of the BCLME and thereby bring long-term social and economic benefits to the people of the region. Thus, the Benguela Current Convention was negotiated and subsequently signed on 18 March 2013. The historic signing of the Benguela Current Convention represents the culmination of many years of research, consultation and negotiation, all of which have been carried out in a spirit of trust and cooperation.

The Convention formally established the Benguela Current Commission as a regional inter-governmental organisation that ensures that industrial development progresses in an environmentally responsible manner, and that our three countries work together to protect biodiversity, maintain the integrity of the BCLME and minimise the risk of long-term or irreversible impacts caused by human activities.

Minimising marine pollution, be it from ships, land-based sources or from the marine mining and oil extraction industries, is a priority of the Benguela Current Convention. Harmonising policies, laws and regulations so that industrial activities in one country do not impact the coastal or marine environment of another country, is another priority. And the transboundary management of fisheries, including the monitoring and control of fishing activity, is a third priority. At the heart of the Convention is the

concept of the ecosystem approach: a long-term approach that aims to maintain ecosystem goods and services for sustainable use, while recognising that humans are an integral part of the process.

I believe that in signing the Benguela Current Convention, we have demonstrated to the world that it is possible for African countries to overcome colonialism, occupation and bitter wars, work together constructively and peacefully and ensure that our shared living marine resources are managed in a sustainable and integrated way for the benefit of all our people.

Human resources development remains a priority in the region. The BCLME is a highly dynamic, complex system and requires constant research to improve knowledge of this ecosystem. As such, we are constantly investing in human capital to ensure that our students, scientists and managers have expertise to provide the best available information and advice in the management of the BCLME. We are also investing in equipment and facilities, including research vessels, research laboratories and monitoring, control and surveillance facilities.

In August this year, the governments of Angola, Namibia and South Africa signed a five-year Strategic Action Programme that sets out the policy actions that are necessary to derive optimal economic and social benefits from the resources of the BCLME, while mitigating the environmental problems and issues that threaten the health of the ecosystem. Our governments recognise that the BCLME offers a myriad of economic opportunities and it is essential that marine resources are utilised to their full potential – but at the same time, we are highly aware of our collective responsibility to balance industrial development with sound environmental management.

We are also aware that we cannot effectively address environmental issues alone – that would be a mammoth task and far beyond our capacity and resources. Therefore, I am pleased to say that, over the years, we have been fortunate to have development partners and collaborators who have consistently worked with us towards our goal of addressing the transboundary problems that beset the BCLME. I wish to sincerely thank Norway, Germany, Iceland, the Global Environmental Facility and the United Nations systems for assisting us in the research and management of the BCLME. Such partnerships and collaboration have benefited us significantly and need to be sustained and scale-up. We must make sure that our future generations do not live in a planet that is hostile to them.

On that note, I wish you every success in your deliberations. And I now officially declare the Third Global Large Marine Ecosystem Conference officially open.

I thank you.