

OPENING SPEECH BY H.E. THE SECRETARY OF STATE FOR ENVIRONMENT, HUMBERTO ROSA AT THE PEW WHALES COMMISSION

FLAD, 9 February 2009

The Government of Portugal is grateful to the Pew Environment Group for having chosen Lisbon for the meeting of the Pew Whales Commission.

I would like to also thank the Luso-American Foundation (FLAD) for hosting the Pew Whales Commission. We all pay tribute here in Portugal to the commitment of FLAD and in particular its Managing Director Charles Buchanan, to marine science, ocean governance, and biodiversity conservation.

And of course we welcome the presence of all of you, also because, as you know the next annual meeting of the International Whaling Commission will be held in our country, in Madeira, next June. Your meeting thus has a very special importance to my Government.

Portugal has a strongly rooted maritime tradition. We were and are sailors, navigators, fishermen – whale hunters too, in our archipelagos of Azores and Madeira. Portugal had a successful experience in the last two decades of transforming, in the Azores and in Madeira, what was until the mid 1980s a very traditional whaling activity, deeply rooted in the local culture, into benign and sustainable whale watching operations that contribute to the local economies far more than the former whale hunting activities, creating employment for former whale hunters and boatmen. We are proud for having achieved a peaceful transition, and we are very keen in assisting other countries, especially developing countries, interested in exploring and developing whale watching opportunities on their own shores.

The position of Portugal in the IWC is well known. As a country that benefits greatly from whale watching and other non-lethal uses of whales, and as a member of the European Union, we welcome the existence of the worldwide moratorium on commercial whaling. What we are seeking are ways in which the current international whale conservation regime can be reinforced.

At the same time, and like all the other members, we are not satisfied with the fact that the political climate within the IWC is not as conducive as would be desirable. Like many others, while recognizing that the moratorium on commercial whaling was and remains a success story for conservation, we are not satisfied that its integrity is being undermined on an on-going basis. If there are ways to resolve what many call the policy impasse of the IWC whereby whaling continues despite the moratorium, Portugal is willing to listen, to promote understanding and trust, to reach a compromise.

But what is the political nature of the present deadlock? On one side, there are those that strongly believe that whales are special animals which should not be treated as mere resources, should not be killed or eaten, some going to the point of undertaking aggressive actions against those that do hunt them. On the other side, there are those that strongly believe that whales are marine natural resources that not only can be exploited, but more than that, resources they always exploited and which they have the right to exploit, some going to the point of pursuing whale hunting irrespective of the cost, of diplomatic damage, or of fierce opposition of others.

Both sides consider that their positions are based on virtue and justice, thus not giving room for compromise. But these are moments when sticking too much to our values does not lead to virtue, but rather to intolerance. The whaling issue cannot be solved by totally imposing any of the views. The solution will demand compromise, probably painful compromise for both sides. The agreement to be reached is likely to leave no one satisfied, and that will probably mean the agreement is right.

In this context we are paying all due attention to the report by Ambassador De Soto and its suggestions on the future of the IWC, which was published a week ago. I believe that some of the options and suggestions contained in the De Soto report are liable to form a good basis for discussion next month at the Intersessional meeting of the IWC in Rome. As the hosts of the annual meeting in June, we are eager to hear your own comments and suggestions, as well as the outcome of the intersessional meeting in Rome next month. Ambassador De Soto writes in his report that "nothing is agreed until everything is agreed". I do not want to be too optimistic, but my deepest hope is that in the four and a half months that separate us from the Madeira meeting, everything can be agreed.

Our hope is indeed that the so-called whaling policy impasse can be resolved, so that the IWC can move into the 21st Century and address more effectively the contemporary issues affecting whales that have emerged since the IWC was created 60 years ago: the impacts of climate change, the by-catch due to entanglement in fishing gears, the effects of increased concentrations of marine pollutants, noise pollution from seismic tests, military operations and shipping, and ship strikes due to the ever increasing maritime traffic.

I believe that the way ahead for the IWC will need the increased involvement of politicians - politicians at ministerial level. To tell you of my own experience on climate change negotiations, when I acted as leading EU's negotiator in the Bali Conference in December 2007, when Portugal was holding EU's Presidency, I have seen how those countries represented at senior negotiator level, after a point could not bring any further contribution to the way forward. Senior negotiators are well trained to defend their position and counteract the positions of others. In doing so, they tend to act as 'spoilers' of whatever approach can emerge that does not match their mandate. In contrast, countries represented at ministerial level could more easily, at a point, grasp the political way-in-between and contribute to success.

I anticipate that the same is likely to happen in the IWC. Thus, we encourage our ministerial colleagues of IWC countries to give it a try by coming to Funchal next June, to open up chances for consensus and success.

I think that a distinctive fact of our times is that the world is facing a sustainability crisis, as shown by issues such as climate change, biodiversity loss, energy problems, and the present economic crisis. All this shows that the time is for enhanced international cooperation, not for less multilateralism.

Human societies will require increased global governance mechanisms, if they are to reach global sustainability. Marine issues are no exception. That is why your work here is so important.