

Address by

Senator the Hon Ian Macdonald

Minister for Fisheries, Forestry and Conservation

To Open

The 16<sup>th</sup> Standing Committee on Tuna and Billfish

Outrigger Resort, Mooloolaba

Wednesday 9<sup>th</sup> July 2003

**AS DELIVERED**

Good morning ladies and gentlemen. I am somewhat overwhelmed to be in the presence of such a distinguished group of very clever people who are going to ply their trades in the next few days in between, I hope, having a look at the beaches that this particular area is famous for.

I know that the work you do is in biology and ecology and fisheries generally, reviewing stock assessments and stocks of fish generally and giving opinions on fisheries and research projects in the Central and Western Pacific and it is so very important. I am very very conscious of the work that you do as the Australian Fisheries Minister, and I am also conscious of how very critical your work is to helping people like me, people like Fisheries Ministers generally, manage the fisheries. And so, I am delighted, and honoured in fact, to be with you today.

I was just saying to the Australian organising committee I am not sure whether or not I was invited here or whether I invited myself, but I did particularly want to come along because I wanted to emphasise to the Australian Government and to the Australian people just how important the work that you do is.

The climate here on the Sunshine Coast, in what we call the Sunshine State of Australia, is very warm and hospitable and I want to extend to you all a similar warm welcome, particularly for those of you who have come such a long way to participate in this forum. I especially want to welcome the participants from Japan who returned to this forum after a short absence.

I am a little suspicious of all of you, as I get the feeling that you followed the habits of the fish that you have studied for so long so closely. They always appear to migrate to where conditions are most favourable to their existence but in this case it is to one of Queensland's premier tourism locations and so I really don't blame you for following their migratory patterns, but I understand that you do it all in the name of science of course.

On a more serious note I think it is fitting that the meeting is hosted here in sunny Mooloolaba and as it is very much a key port for Australia's commercial fishers and a very good area for game fishing as well. I am pleased to see representatives from both of those groups here today at your forum. The work that is going to be done at this meeting this morning is, as I have mentioned, very

very important to Australia as it is to each of your countries, because it relates to fish species that travel all over the Pacific.

This of course means that we all share the joint responsibility of managing these fish. Your research work requires cooperation and the sharing of data and ideas and this cooperative approach certainly helps the Australian research agencies such as the Bureau of Rural Sciences (BRS) and the Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organisations (CSIRO) to provide the Australian Government with very high quality scientific advice so essential both to Australian domestic fishery management decisions and to our approach to the international fisheries agenda.

We are well aware that the world's fisheries have many difficulties and challenges to overcome if they are going to continue to remain an essential source of protein for human kind. The fact that nearly 1 billion people rely on fisheries for their food has daunted many by the sheer scale of what the Earth's fisheries are actually facing. You know better than I that many fisheries are already over exploited, some have collapsed and in most cases there are too many boats and people fishing them to allow any person,

community, company or country to profit from the fisheries, or more importantly, for the stocks to be sustainable.

Fisheries management is a very complex business. However, for it to work well you only need two ingredients I think, a sound scientific base, and the will to face the hard decisions when they need to be taken so that future generations can benefit from the fish that up until recently have been taken for granted by a very complacent world. This is of course where you all come in, your role is very very critical but your work cannot be viewed in isolation and whether you recognise it or not, you are in an extremely powerful position in terms of influencing the international fisheries agenda.

The research that you conduct feeds into both national and international decision making processes that do impact upon fish stocks globally. So you all exercise a position of great responsibility and as this is the case I have a request of you today, or maybe it is a challenge, and that is that I ask you to use your influence, your knowledge and your credibility to encourage the Governments of your respective countries to throw away the rhetoric and the diplomatic double speak and to actually take some

firm and decisive action in a number of areas that are currently suffering from an overt lack of action.

As you know, as the state of the planet's fisheries has declined, Regional Fisheries Management Organisations (RFMO) have been established to try and reverse this trend and apply management to high seas stocks. But unfortunately, with only a few exceptions, their usefulness has not lived up to the expectations of their founders.

I want to mention the Indian Ocean Tuna Commission (IOTC). This is probably the least successful of the RFMOs and to support this I only have to point out that bigeye tuna is being fished at around 60,000 tonnes above the stock's maximum sustainable yield. For this to be allowed to continue knowingly is a disgrace. For all of the countries that are involved in the IOTC it really is time to take strong and united action before it is really too late. Could I ask all of you if you are involved in providing advice to Government to actually start pushing for delegations to get serious about making the IOTC actually deliver what it set out to do, that is, to manage the fish, not to redistribute excess fishing capacity from other fishing nations. If you are asking yourselves "Why us? Why

don't you do something about it yourself, you are the politician?"

The answer is that I, and the Australian Government, are devoting a lot of energy and resources behind the scenes to these issues.

I was in Paris recently for an OECD round table of Fisheries Ministers, particularly relating to illegal fishing. I can't tell you exactly what was said because Chatham House Rules were applied to that meeting – but I can tell you that there was some fairly straight talking between Ministers and some countries at the table, I have to say, became less confident and less comfortable as the full and frank discussions continued.

While I was in Paris I also met my French counterpart and specifically raised the issue of how dysfunctional the IOTC was and for the need for it to be pulled into gear and to start delivering conservation outcomes. I am delighted to say that the French shared my views and agreed that the Commission risked losing all relevance and any chance of helping the tuna stocks throughout that region unless it was reformed.

Similarly, while the Commission for the Conservation of Antarctic Marine Living Resources (CCAMLR) functions much more

professionally then the IOTC, there certainly is room for improvement and Australia will again be urging other members to introduce a better Catch Documentation Scheme (CDS) and a centralised vessel monitoring system (VMS) and some black and white lists of both vessels and registers. I would certainly welcome any support that any of you can give to me by urging your nations to support the proposals that Australia will be putting on the table at the CCAMLR meeting in October.

I recognise that not a lot of the countries represented here are involved in CCAMLR but through your international scientific connections and networks you will know other scientists and I would urge you to urge them to urge their countries to really get serious about Regional Fisheries Management Organisations and I particularly, as I say, mentioned the IOTC and CCAMLR.

But on a brighter note the area for which you have responsibility is of course the Pacific fish stocks and I do want to talk about the developments for the Western and Central Pacific Fisheries Commission. The Commission, as you understand well and of course you will be helping this, will be managing the last great stock of fish resources in the world.

Australia is fully committed to supporting the Pacific Island countries in our stewardship and management of these fish resources. I cannot tell you how importantly Australia views the sustainability of these fish resources. They are fundamental for the long term prospects and economies of a number of Pacific Island countries and Australia will not weaken or compromise its position in that we need to actually build upon for the current convention text and we want to ensure that we can deliver to the world the very best Regional Fisheries Management Organisation for these Pacific fish stocks.

I am encouraged with the developments to date through the PrepCon process but I do remind all countries that are involved that we should not delay unnecessarily bringing the Commission into being – because the longer we delay the more we put at risk the sustainability of these very important stocks of fish.

The work that you are doing in relation to the Western and Central Pacific is a very good example of what quality input can be achieved in the establishment of the Western and Central Pacific Fisheries Commission – your work of course will be central and

critical to ensuring that the tuna and billfish stocks of the Pacific Ocean are able to continue to support the local and international fleets that actually depend upon those resources.

We are 100% committed to working with our South Pacific neighbours to solve issues of importance to them. One of Australia's key goals for the region is to ensure that the Pacific fish stocks are managed in accordance with the principles of ecologically sustainable development.

I am aware that there is a fine line that scientists have to tread and encourage you all to stay the balanced course. There have been instances reported to me where various individuals or groups have used their research for their own gain and glorification rather than the greater good of the global community. I have also been informed that this abuse of science is very much a concern to many of you in this room, with poorly researched but highly publicised fisheries science undermining the credibility that your profession has worked so hard to establish. I am informed that this is particularly true with regard to research on the effects of fishing on predatory fish stocks like tuna and billfish.

I do encourage greater collaboration between the world's tuna research bodies to comprehensively address the question of what the effects of industrial fishing has been on tuna and billfish over the last 50 years, and I am heartened to hear that such collaborations are now in fact taking place.

I am also aware of the considerable and growing concern over the extent of illegal, unreported and unregulated fishing in the world's oceans. This issue makes it more difficult for scientists such as yourselves to have any surety over the assessments that you make. Achieving sustainable fisheries can only come if we all recognise the need to work tirelessly to eliminate IUU fishing.

My Government has taken a lead role in this respect and I hope that this endeavour is not only recognised, but also supported and pursued by all Governments in our region, and in fact I mention Palau, that country did earlier this year when they destroyed a vessel that had been caught plundering shark fin within their Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ).

I understand that there have been many and considerable advances in fisheries science that many of you have either been

responsible for, or have contributed to. Your work has had a very positive effect on the management objectives and practices that will enhance the prospects of long-term sustainability.

If we are to protect, secure and build the world's fisheries resources we must focus on short-term gains that occur at the expense of stocks and fisheries of the future, and we must begin to genuinely focus on the health of our planet and the wellbeing of future generations.

You have been entrusted with this difficult task to come up with advice and solutions for these difficult and complex problems and I have every confidence that if you maintain your focus and dedication you will achieve what you set out to do.

Ladies and Gentlemen I wish you all the very best in your combined endeavours throughout the course of this meeting. I see as the Australian Forestry Minister as well that you have contributed a couple of plantations of forests with all of the papers that have been prepared there and so you obviously have a very heavy and intense work programme in front of you.

I do wish you all the best and I hope that you are able to take a positive step towards a more sustainable fishing future and the work that you do really is so critically important to the decisions that Governments have to make in the very very near future.

Before I conclude can I extend a thank you to those of you who have been instrumental in organising this meeting. First of all the chair of the SCTB Committee, Dr Sung Kwon Soh, and the rest of his committee for their tireless efforts and work and the work that you do, Dr Soh congratulations and thank you.

To Dr John Hampton and the staff of the Oceanic Fisheries Programme of the SPC whose annual task it is to make sure that this meeting happens. I understand that it started off as a fairly informal gathering of scientists but it has grown in stature, as it has necessarily grown I suspect in formality. It is very good and congratulations to Dr John Hampton and his staff.

The organising committee here in Australia who I understand are John Kalish and Dr James Findlay, and I can tell you without embarrassing Dr Findlay, that he has to be a very good fellow because his wife actually works with me, so you have a bit of an insider approach to fisheries management in Australia. Although I

have to say she is very professional and she never talks about her husband's work.

Also to John Gunn and Toni Cracknell from the CSIRO who I know have done a lot of logistical work behind this meeting.

Japan, Papua New Guinea and the SPC for providing the funding for developing nation participants in this meeting and thank you to those countries for that generosity. And also, my own Government through my Department, the Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry – Australia, the Australian Fisheries Management Authority, and the CSIRO for financial support to this meeting.

I understand that my Department is actually putting on a dinner for you later on and I hope that you have a wonderful time. I hope you get an opportunity to taste some of Australia's very best wine, because we have not only good fish stocks that we share with you, but we have some of the world's best wines as well and I hope you enjoy that.

The place here, and your presence in Australia is really a great honour to Australia and I thank you again for coming and wish you

well in your deliberations over the next week. I certainly do hope that we can all continue to work together very fruitfully and determinedly in this committee now and in the years ahead. And it is with great pleasure that I officially open the 16<sup>th</sup> annual meeting of the Standing Committee on Tuna and Billfish.