

“PROTECTING OUR OCEANS – THE SEYCHELLES EXPERIENCE”
Lecture delivered by President Danny Faure to the University of Oxford
on 18 October 2019

Thank you very much, Professor Adebani.

I would like to begin by thanking all of you for being here today and coming to listen to what I must share. It is a pleasure to address a group of like-minded people, united by a common interest in the protection of our oceans, and the leadership journey of a small island but large ocean state in the Indian Ocean at the forefront of ocean conservation, resilience, sustainability and climate action.

On behalf of the people of Seychelles, it is a great privilege to have been given the opportunity to speak at this esteemed institution.

I have come here today to share the story of Seychelles. I am here to share how a country of 94, 000 people, less than two-thirds of the population of Oxford, with only 452 square kilometres of terrestrial land in the middle of the Indian Ocean, is now a global thought leader in sustainable ocean governance and champion of the Blue Economy for Africa.

Seychelles has been a trailblazer in environmental conservation from the beginning because we believe in it. Since our independence, we have understood that protecting our environment is not just the right thing to do, but the necessary thing to do. Being invited to speak here today, is a powerful recognition of the longstanding vision of Seychelles and our journey so far.

The ocean is the lifeblood of the Seychellois people, and is central to our identity and our continued existence. With one of the most extensive ocean territories in the world, for my country, the concept of the Blue Economy is our pathway to prosperity. With 1.358 million square kilometres of marine space, an Exclusive Economic Zone 3000 times bigger than our land mass, we rely on a sustainable ocean-based economy to realise our development aspirations.

Seychelles’ vast ocean territory brings development opportunities and challenges – and responsibility. Conservation is essential to ensure that the pillars of our economy remain sustainable. By planning correctly to protect our environment, we can be sure we are also protecting our people and their livelihoods against an uncertain future.

But it is not just because I am an islander that I have a special relationship with the ocean – the ocean has a special relationship with all of us. Success against climate breakdown, and achieving the United Nations’ 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, comes only with a healthy sustainable ocean.

Ocean preservation is highlighted by the United Nations Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 14, ‘Life under water’, but it is also inextricably linked to other SDGs. Around 60 million people are employed in the fisheries sector, the majority of whom are artisanal fishermen in developing countries, contributing to SDG 8, ‘decent work and economic growth’. It is related

to SDG 2, 'Zero Hunger', because close to half of the world's population is dependent on seafood as a primary source of protein. Our ocean generates 50% of the Earth's oxygen and absorbs 25% of all carbon emissions, which is central to both the health of world citizens, SDG 3, and the health of our planet, relating to climate action, SDG 13.

Maintaining the health of our ocean is important for everyone, especially those at the bottom of the economic pyramid. In this sense, reversing the damage done to our oceans and advocating for ocean conservation not only has an environmental benefit but ultimately also a profound economic one.

Seychelles' brand of the Blue Economy envisions an ocean in robust health driving a prosperous economy. We focus on the sustainable use of ocean resources for economic diversification, shared prosperity, food security, and healthy and productive ocean ecosystems. The concept of the Blue Economy is vital to our domestic policy, to our foreign policy, and for our national security, but it is also critical to who we are.

Towards this end and with the help of the Commonwealth we launched our Blue Economy Strategic Policy Framework and Roadmap in October last year, making us one of the first countries in the world to define and clearly explain the concept of a Blue Economy.

Safeguarding marine life, habitats and ecosystems from the effects of ocean warming, acidification, de-oxygenation, overfishing, deep-sea mining, plastic pollution and other threats is a global responsibility.

Seychelles believes that while young people are indeed the future custodians of our planet, for those of us who live on islands and along the coasts especially they are also today's keepers of the ocean. It is our generation's responsibility to ensure the youth inherit a world of peace and prosperity which my Government believes is inextricably linked to the continued viability of our ocean.

Speaking here at Oxford University is particularly special because I come from a country where students and young people are at the forefront of our environmental conservation efforts. In June last year, I had the privilege to officially launch the Aldabra Clean-Up Project, a collaboration between the Seychelles Islands Foundation and The Queen's College to tackle ocean plastic pollution through action, education and research.

A team of 12 young people consisting of Seychellois volunteers and Oxford graduate students removed almost 26 thousand kilograms of marine debris from Aldabra earlier this year, among which were 50,000 pairs of flip-flops. Over just 5 weeks, the expedition collected more than 25 tonnes of plastic litter!

Aldabra Atoll has been described as "one of the world's greatest surviving natural treasures" by Sir David Attenborough, and is an iconic UNESCO World Heritage Site containing near-pristine marine ecosystems now threatened by plastic pollution and the climate crisis.

The Aldabra Clean-Up story has kick-started a wave of change both within Seychelles, the UK and internationally. Spearheaded by passionate volunteers, it has reached thousands of

people all around the world, and continues to shed light on the critical impact of plastic pollution on our seas and particularly on small island nations.

Most of this marine debris did not originate from Seychelles. The Aldabra Clean-Up Project provides essential baseline data with which to monitor the plastic pollution issue. That is why, as a country, we have extended our hand in partnership to various regional and international bodies and continue to work together with other countries - because this is a global problem and requires a global solution.

The high seas face growing exploitation from a handful of mainly rich nations. The research is clear – Marine Protected Areas that take into account climate change mitigation and adaptation in the design, management and monitoring of these areas is the only way we can prepare for an uncertain future. Protecting the biodiversity of our seas by bringing good governance and law to the whole ocean is the most important thing we can do to ensure our collective survival.

Seychelles is well on its way to committing 30% of our waters to marine protection by next year, an area roughly twice the size of the United Kingdom. This is in line with the scientific consensus that we must protect at least 30% of the ocean by 2030 to support a resilient ocean and planet.

Marine protection means limiting the use of these maritime spaces to carefully regulated activities such as scientific research or controlled tourism, to achieve long-term conservation and improve the resilience of marine ecosystems.

We are developing a comprehensive Marine Spatial Plan (MSP), the second largest in the world after Norway, to ensure future generations of Seychellois can enjoy the incredible marine biodiversity in our waters. Creating and enforcing marine protected areas means fish stocks can recover, providing increased food security and additional fishing jobs. We are tackling the climate emergency while also sustaining the Blue Economy.

We need more data, more information, to support our conservation efforts, clearly chart our way forward, and explore the full potential of the Blue Economy. The deep ocean is the beating heart of the planet, yet we have better maps of Mars than we do of the ocean floor. So Seychelles partnered with Nekton for a ground-breaking deep-sea expedition earlier this year to better identify priority areas for protection.

In March, together with Nekton, a research institute working in collaboration with the University of Oxford, Seychelles carried out more than 50 submersible dives up to 300 metres below the ocean surface using state-of-the-art technology to generate data critical to informing our marine spatial planning process and ocean policy.

The Indian Ocean is one of the world's least explored oceans, and the findings not only document the rich underwater landscape of the country but also offer the potential for exciting discoveries. The expedition also comes with robust investments in capacity development for Seychellois researchers and scientists, which aligns with our vision to transform our economy and create a sustainable and diversified base.

I was very happy to join one of the submersible dives, where we went down to 124 metres. Surrounded by an incredible underwater world rich with marine life, I was proud to deliver a speech from that depth - a first for a head of state, I'm told. The statement was broadcast live, urging a more significant worldwide effort to protect the ocean. But I wouldn't want the novelty of the event to overshadow the message – safeguarding our marine wealth and heritage is a collective responsibility and the time to act is now.

Seychelles will continue to support Nekton as it partners with Governments in the Indian Ocean region to catalyse 30% ocean protection by 2030. Each Nekton mission is a powerful reminder of how applied research can better inform ocean governance and the public mandate for political action on ocean conservation.

Seychelles' designation of 30% of our EEZ as marine protected areas will triple our commitment under United Nations Sustainable Development Goal 14 to protect 10% of our ocean territory by 2010. It will also achieve the 30-by-30 goal of protecting 30% of our ocean by 2030 - which scientists say is crucial to safeguard marine wildlife and mitigate the impacts of the climate emergency – a decade early.

Seychelles graduated to a high-income country in 2015. Instead of complaining about losing grant funding, we turned to innovative financing for our development, starting with a first-of-its-kind 22-million dollar Debt Swap for Ocean Conservation and Climate Adaptation. We pioneered the deal with the support of the Nature Conservancy and the Paris Club, a group of creditor countries dedicated to addressing the challenges of debtor nations.

The deal helps fund local conservation, sustainability and climate action activities through the Seychelles Conservation and Climate Adaptation Trust, SeyCATT, which we set up to manage the proceeds of the debt swap.

Seychelles found a way to manage part of our debt while also tackling climate resilience, to restructure our sovereign debt in exchange for committing to conservation goals. A portion of our debt repayments now funds innovative marine protection, climate action and sustainable ocean management activities, including the development of our marine spatial plan.

In October last year, Seychelles followed up the debt swap by launching the world's first sovereign blue bonds to finance our transition to sustainable artisanal fisheries which will, among other objectives, help strengthen the resilience of our ocean to cop with climate and other threats.

Our 10-year 15-million-dollar blue bonds supported by the World Bank and the Global Environment Facility (GEF), make Seychelles the first country to use capital markets to raise funds for the sustainable use of marine resources. The blue bonds and the debt swap, or Blue Finance as we call them, together provide sustainable funding that will help Seychelles implement both the 2030 Agenda and the Paris Agreement in a more harmonious relationship with our coastal and marine ecosystems.

Our next step in ocean climate action will be to champion the inclusion of blue carbon and nature-based solutions to climate change as part of our Nationally Determined Contribution or NDC under the Paris Agreement. This too, will strengthen the resilience of our ocean space as a carbon sink, especially in those areas protected under the debt swap.

Our Blue Finance also contributes to youth, gender, community and STEM empowerment by providing grants and concessionary loans to Seychelles' civil society, scientific community and private sector, especially young entrepreneurs and small and medium enterprises to help build our Blue Economy. There are, for example, blue grants for fisheries reform and concessionary blue loans to enable artisanal fishermen and businesses in the fisheries sector to improve their value chains and reduce overcapacity and overfishing.

It is our sincere hope that our efforts to identify new sources of sustainable finance by leveraging our biggest asset, the ocean around us, can be replicated and upscaled by other island, coastal and ocean nations for sustainable development and climate action. Our debt-swap agreement could be a model for larger deals as conservationists buy a country's sovereign debt in return for policy changes that will help the environment.

Some of our fellow islanders in the Pacific and the eastern Indian Ocean face the prospect of their entire countries disappearing beneath the waves if the international community does not urgently do what the IPCC's special reports on global warming of 1.5C and the ocean and the cryosphere warn us we must do. If this happens, ancient island civilisations dating back thousands of years will collapse.

Nevertheless, despite being by far the least responsible for climate change but the most vulnerable to its effects, small island states like Seychelles are resiliently leading by example as incubators of solutions to challenges hardly of our making.

In Seychelles, we are transitioning to clean energy – including by tendering for Africa's first privately owned floating solar farm - while protecting our coastlines, adopting more sustainable fishing and coastal development practices and rebuilding our coral reefs. With the right support, innovation and partners, we can do more to sustainably harness the vast ocean resources that surround us to grow our economy, secure and strengthen the welfare of our people, and tackle climate change.

Seychelles is increasingly investing in ecosystem restoration projects while transitioning to more sustainable tourism and fisheries. We are restoring blue carbon ecosystems such as coastal wetlands, mangroves, seagrass beds and coral reefs through projects funded by the innovative Blue Finance we have raised. This allows the ocean to continue to absorb excess carbon, clean our waters, feed our people and protect our communities.

Even the private sector has come on board following in the wake of environmental NGOs, with hotels setting up coral nurseries and farms which double as eco-tourism attractions.

Seychelles is dedicated to ecosystem restoration; where there was destruction from natural and other causes we now build and rehabilitate. However, while we actively pursue activities to conserve the health of marine ecosystems, despite all our creativity and efforts there is an

ever-increasing need of financing for more ambitious climate action beyond the Blue Finance we have raised so far.

On a more positive side, there has been a notable increase in marine research by Seychellois researchers and scientists funded by grants from the Seychelles Conservation and Climate Adaptation Trust. The information generated by this science will help us chart our way forward and explore the full potential of Seychelles' vast Economic Exclusive Zone and Blue Economy.

What Seychelles is championing is a Blue Economy strategy that will leverage our ocean and marine resources to put food on the table, encourage economic diversification, and generally improve the welfare of our citizens including by offering a future to the new generations coming out of school and university.

It will, at the same time, protect the ocean that surrounds us and mitigate, counter and adapt to the effects of climate change. Our Blue Economy roadmap identifies strategic objectives and priorities for action and investment to 2030, in line with the 2030 Agenda.

Implementing the roadmap necessitates close collaboration with all partners, including from the private sector, civil society, communities and, most importantly for our future – our students and our youth. We aim to translate our Blue Economy strategy into a language that all our people understand, and which appeals to the needs of every community and group in society to ensure buy-in at the local level.

Marine protection is vital if we are to strengthen the resilience of the ocean, and ultimately strengthen our resilience against climate change. We need to acknowledge the fact that time is running out, and that we need to be bolder and demand more climate action.

Our people's active engagement is crucial to our success as we look to sustainable ocean-based activity as the next frontier of our development.

More than most, as I recently told the United Nations General Assembly in New York, island nations must, because of our size and vulnerability, have faith in the multilateral international order. We are by nature isolated, and by design tied to the rest of the world. We rely heavily on this premise as well as on the actions or inactions of others for our very survival.

Fortunately, young people around the world have taken a determined stand to secure their future. In Seychelles, we see youth-led NGOs partner with Government and the private sector to prioritise the fight against climate change, pollution and other threats to the environment. A youth-led grassroots movement led to a ban on many single-use plastics and continues to advocate for environmental and especially ocean protection.

To us in Seychelles, the ocean, the beating blue heart of our planet, is key to our search for sustainable development and climate solutions. The ocean is the last frontier which if used responsibly, will lead to shared prosperity and security.

However, as with most effects of climate change, the challenges of the changing ocean will not be distributed equally. Small island and large ocean states like Seychelles are particularly exposed to the consequences, and we have always recognised that sustainable ocean management is key to our survival.

With the help of our valued partners, Seychelles will continue to promote the ocean and seas as drivers of sustainable development and climate action. Over the years, we have each in our way created the problems that the ocean faces.

We can solve them, and we must solve them, together.

I thank you all.