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UNICPOLOS Panel Presentation:

## **World Oceans Day 2005:**

### **“Putting Humanity before Technology”**

Every year for the last three, environmental NGO representatives have stood before you and pleaded for real and immediate protection of ocean life. Every year, on behalf of the millions of people that support us, we have asked that you become guardians of the oceans for our children’s future - to protect against overfishing, ocean pollution from noise, shipping, oil and gas exploration, military activities and increasingly the impacts of climate change. Every year these human-induced impacts further suffocate the very waters that give life to our planet and threaten our global food supply. Yet every year we have to come back and ask again.

As many of you know, I really struggled this year to think what to say. I wondered what I could tell you that could make you feel as passionate about the need for protection as we do. I wondered what would speak to your hearts as well as your minds – or whether it would be better to simply focus on practical policy-oriented suggestion to point the way forward.

Then last week, I found a story about a newly discovered seamount off the coast of Samoa. Scientists from several countries (Australia, the United States and Britain), working together, found an ecosystem housing thousands of eels, which they believe is a newly discovered species of fish. The scientists say it’s the first time such a complex life-form has been found living in an underwater volcano. Dr Adele Pile, from the University of Sydney, and one of the scientists on the mission, commented, “This is the first time that this volcano has ever been explored and I’m hoping that it begins a new era of discovery and exploration about our own planet, because the deep sea is such an unknown ecosystem. It covers about two thirds of the Earth’s surface, yet we’ve only explored about one per cent of it. So the more exploration we can have, the more things we can find out and understand about how our planet is functioning.”

Now that’s an amazing thing. But I don’t have to tell you that. Because all of you know that at least three new species are discovered in our oceans every WEEK (according to the census of marine life). You know that in one part of the deep ocean off Angola, 80% of the species examined were new to science. You all know how little we all know.

Yet there is one thing that science DOES know: the devastation caused to deep-sea habitats by high seas bottom trawling. Science has shown that these habitats are so vulnerable to bottom trawling they will not recover within our children’s lifetimes. Every

trawl puts unique and irreplaceable ecosystems at risk. As a result, scientists from around the world are calling for immediate action. Over 1000 scientists wrote to this meeting last year urging you to support a moratorium on high seas bottom trawling. Earlier this year, some of the world's leading scientists travelled across Europe to address decision-makers about the need for that action. In 2002, an ICES survey demonstrated that bottom trawling has the greatest adverse impact on the seabed, in particular in the deep sea. A comprehensive study of gear types in 2004, *Shifting Gears*, examined the relative impacts of 10 different commercial fishing gears on marine ecosystems. The result was unanimous agreement among the academic and industry groups surveyed: that bottom trawling did the most damage to the seabed.

Precaution means taking action to prevent harm before it is too late. Article 15 of the Rio Declaration stipulates, "*where there are threats of serious or irreversible damage, lack of full scientific certainty shall not be used as a reason for postponing cost-effective measures to prevent environmental degradation.*" The Preamble to the Convention on Biological Diversity (1992) states, "... *where there is a threat of significant reduction or loss of biological diversity, lack of full scientific certainty should not be used as a reason for postponing measures to avoid or minimize such a threat.*" In this case, the science is definitive and irrefutable. So action clearly needs to be taken to protect deep-sea life or we run the risk of losing a global resource before even understanding what that loss means.

According to the government of New Zealand's website, "human damage to marine environments is not as well publicised as the depletion of the rainforests, but the sea is also under threat from our mistakes. We often think of fish species in isolation, but each species is part of a complex ocean ecosystem. There are interactions between fish, plankton, nutrients, water and air. If we don't understand how these interactions work, we can upset the relationships between species or between species and their habitat."

Sustainability is all about maintaining balanced relationships. This meeting is concerned with the sustainable management of the oceans. With the biodiversity of the world's oceans under threat, the sustainable livelihoods of the people dependent on our oceans for food security is compromised. Some 64% of the oceans are designated as high seas areas. Yet 75% of the high seas are unregulated. There can be no sustainable management of the oceans if the majority of those oceans lack regulation. Glover and Smith (2003) estimate that those high seas fish stocks currently being fished will be commercially extinct in 20 years and are unlikely to ever recover. Once that happens it will be too late. Before it happens, appropriate regulations must be put in place to ensure that any deepwater fishing on the high seas is conducted on an equitable, precautionary and ecologically sustainable basis consistent with UNCLOS, the Convention on Biological Diversity, the Fish Stocks Agreement and the FAO Code of Conduct. Failure to take action to prevent the serial depletion and biodiversity destruction already witnessed in deep water fisheries, is inconsistent with your responsibilities for the conservation of living marine resources and biodiversity under international law.

Yesterday, the Greenpeace ship *Rainbow Warrior* witnessed yet another bottom trawler dragging the life out of the bottom of the international waters of the Tasman Sea in search of a few fish. Bottom trawling is a guaranteed method for upsetting the

relationship between species and habitats. Einstein once said “Our technology has surpassed our humanity”. He was talking of nuclear weapons. The high seas bottom trawl fleets that ply the high seas, constrained only by how much they can catch in these largely unregulated waters, come very close to being a weapon of mass destruction for deep-sea life.

Delegates, this meeting offers a rare opportunity to do something positive and proactive before it's too late. To make good on the promises you have already made and honour the agreements you have already signed. High seas bottom trawling is still relatively small scale. Even Spain, the country with the largest fleet of bottom trawlers agrees that this fishing method is destructive and that something needs to be done.

A narrow window of opportunity has opened to take the action needed to protect high seas biodiversity. But that window is closing as fleets move further south and into the deep waters of the high seas. Some of the cold water coral reefs being destroyed by high seas bottom trawling are 8000 years old -- they started growing at the same time that humans were inventing the wheel. We know that unregulated fisheries on the high seas are destroying a biodiversity of immense richness and value for all humankind. Is it now necessary to reinvent the wheel by negotiating new regional agreements or measures to control the activities of industrial fishing vessels or can interim measures be adopted to conserve deep-sea life now?

Yesterday's discussion in this forum on this issue may have left some delegates frustrated. It certainly underscored the need to tackle this issue in some manner. Everyone in this room is concerned about the need to ensure sustainable fisheries for the future. That requires placing fisheries management firmly in the context of the broader marine ecosystem, and taking account of all human impacts in management measures.

What is clear, is that this meeting cannot go back on what the UNGA agreed just last year: where the Sustainable Fisheries Resolution clearly and emphatically stated that action must be taken. Like the cold water corals that form the cornerstones for healthy cold water ecosystems, that resolution is a solid foundation upon which this gathering must now build. Adopting short-term measures to address the impacts of high seas bottom trawling will provide the breathing space needed for you to consider how best to fulfil your responsibilities under international law to conserve marine biodiversity and ensure sustainable fisheries for future generations. Such measures could be the catalyst signalling the international community's willingness to move forward and address broader oceans governance issues in a serious and determined way.

Thank-you.