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**Address by Mr Koïchiro Matsuura, Director-General of UNESCO,
on the occasion of the opening ceremony
of the Ministerial Round Table on oceans:
"Building stewardship for the Ocean: The contribution of
UNESCO to responsible ocean governance"**

UNESCO, 12 October 2009

Distinguished Ministers,
Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

It gives me great pleasure to welcome you to UNESCO for this Ministerial Round Table on "Building stewardship for the Ocean: The contribution of UNESCO to responsible ocean governance."

On the occasion of the 50th anniversary of IOC, this is the first time a UNESCO General Conference round table is dedicated specifically to the oceans, following roundtables on the basic sciences and on science and technology for sustainable development at the 33rd and 34th sessions of the General Conference.

I would like to take this opportunity to thank the current Chairman of the IOC, Captain Javier Valladares, as well as all past Chairpersons, including Mr David Pugh who is here with us today, for their collective leadership of the Commission over the past 50 years.

Today's roundtable also follows last week's ministerial debate on two themes: how to invest out of the global economic crisis, and how UNESCO can be an effective multilateral actor. It is clear that along with education, the theme of last week's roundtable, investing in the sciences, including the ocean sciences, is a key to economic development. It is also clear that to be a successful and effective multilateral actor, UNESCO and its IOC need to continue collaborating closely with other UN entities involved in oceans, as it has done over the past 50 years.

Allow me also to begin by expressing my gratitude to all the Ministers who have made time to be with us today. This is a testimony of your countries' commitment to this Organization, and of the importance you place on ocean governance, as was again emphasized during the general policy debate. I would also like to thank the moderators, theme presenters, keynote speakers and other contributors for the guidance and input they will provide over the next two days.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

The oceans are the ultimate global commons, providing essential ecological services that make life possible on our planet. Ocean science has in the last decades repeatedly highlighted the impacts of human activities on the marine environment, delivering accumulated evidence of degradations of marine ecosystems.

Many special habitats are threatened by unsustainable uses, especially in the coastal environment. Mangroves, estuaries, coral reefs and seamounts harbouring hot spots of marine biodiversity are under threat.

Compounding these problems is the effect of climate change on the oceans, which you will be discussing under thematic session 3. In trying to address climate change, we need to make a special effort to maintain the health of the ocean. Any impairment on the capacity of the ocean to absorb the excess CO² coming from human activities will exacerbate the negative impacts of climate change.

Regulation of the high seas and trans-zonal fisheries also remains a major challenge. There is an increasing concern that many fishery practices are unsustainable and that global fisheries will face a major crisis.

Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen

The ocean is a special international space which mostly lies beyond national jurisdiction. You will have the opportunity in today's **first thematic session** to discuss how the United Nations system is called to play a direct role in building a law-based regime for the use of the oceans and its resources.

We can be genuinely proud that UNESCO's IOC has been at the centre of all the efforts to build stewardship for the oceans over the past decades, since it presented a special report on the oceans to the UN Summit on the Environment in 1972. The UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), adopted in 1982, and which entered into force in 1994, now forms the basis of this law-based regime.

Whilst UNCLOS, operating under its own Conference of Parties, provides an integrated legal framework on which to build effective regulations regarding the different uses of the ocean, the institutional and technical support for the implementation of the Convention is provided by other UN specialized agencies and programmes operating under their own intergovernmental governance mechanisms.

In 2001, UNESCO adopted the Convention on the Protection of the Underwater Cultural Heritage, which fills an important gap in the coverage of UNCLOS, and an often overlooked aspect of the world's cultural legacy: its underwater heritage. This can take the form of shipwrecks, submerged ancient buildings and sites, many of which contain treasures of great cultural – and financial - significance.

Severe limitations do exist in the monitoring and enforcement of existing regulations because of fundamental weakness of national and international institutions, which are still too compartmentalized. Sectoral and fragmented policies in place over the years for managing the ocean and its resources have resulted in a patchwork of international treaties and regulations on the subject (numbered at 589 today).

In order to set the global priorities and give strategic guidance, the General Assembly of the United Nations needs to be equipped with an effective policy instrument true to the principle stated in preamble of UNCLOS that oceans “need to be considered through an integrated, interdisciplinary and intersectoral approach.” Also, effective ocean and coastal policies need to be evidence based, which implies targets and recommendations that can be judged against clear benchmarks and indicators.

The 2002 World Summit on Sustainable Development therefore recommended to establish a Regular Process for the regular monitoring of the ocean. In 2005, the UN General Assembly requested UNEP and UNESCO's IOC to serve as the lead agencies to carry out a three years start-up phase, in cooperation with all relevant

UN agencies and Programs of the UN, to conduct an “Assessment of Assessments”.

We are very proud for having led, together with UNEP, this Startup Phase of the Regular Process and of the outcome of the Assessment of Assessments, whose report you can find on your tables. We are extremely grateful for the spirit of cooperation that we found in our sister agencies and programmes, notably our co-lead UNEP, as well as other members of UN-Oceans, in particular with UN-DOALOS, FAO, IMO and WMO.

I take this opportunity to express my thanks for the recognition we received for the work done. I would also like to express our sincere appreciation to Member States that have supported financially the Assessment of Assessments, as well as those that have provided constructive guidance during this process. Finally, special thanks go to all the members of the Groups of Experts, contributing their expertise on a voluntary basis.

In this context, the conclusions and recommendations put forward to the 64th Session of the UN General assembly by the meeting of the Ad hoc Working Group of the Whole that took place in New York earlier this fall are very encouraging. They revealed that there is a wide consensus on the urgent need to conduct an integrated global assessment of the ocean, including socio-economic aspects, and on the general objective of starting a regular process maintaining the ocean under review.

Although many countries expressed their wish to have more time to review some of the building blocks of the process, consideration was also given to the possibility of an immediate first cycle that could be conducted between 2010 and 2015 and at the same time could report to the Commission on Sustainable Development.

In the **second thematic session** of this Round Table, you will have an opportunity to explore ways to maintain the momentum on the process, discuss the needs for capacity building, the role that UNESCO and its IOC can play and the mechanisms upon which we can rely to deliver on these needs.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Over 80 % of the total additional energy accumulated by the planet due to global warming has already been absorbed by the ocean. It is fair to say that the ocean has already spared us from dangerous climate change. But the ocean is also forced to absorb from the atmosphere annually 2.1 billion tons of man-made CO₂. This is equivalent to saying that each day we dump 25 million tons of Carbon into the ocean. As a consequence, the ocean is turning more acidic, posing a huge threat to organisms with calcareous structures like coral reefs.

You will be discussing in some detail some of these impacts in the **third thematic session** of this Round Table.

One area in which UNESCO, through its IOC, can immediately help, is in assessing the impact of sea-level rise, an unavoidable consequence of climate change. Coastal inundations can take place very slowly, in the context of climate change, or can take place in a few seconds, for example in a tsunami. IOC has built the capabilities around the world to simulate inundations in the coastal zone. This knowledge is ready to be applied all over the world. We should discuss how it can be put into action at the shortest possible delay.

Your Excellencies, Ladies and Gentleman,

We are very grateful for the trust you are giving us by attending this Round Table. I decided to convene it, because the issues that we will discuss are of critical importance for the future of our planet and future generations. On the occasion of the 50th anniversary of IOC, one of UNESCO's longstanding flagship programmes, it was also important to celebrate IOC's considerable contributions to building stewardship for the ocean during the last 50 years.

I would like to take this opportunity to pay tribute to Patricio Bernal, IOC's Executive Secretary since April 1998, who will retire at the end of this year, for his strong leadership over the past eleven years. I am very grateful to him for his loyal contribution to the Organization. I would also like to welcome Wendy Watson Wright, who will take up her functions as new IOC Executive Secretary in January 2010. She will begin her posting with the important task of leading IOC's fiftieth year celebration.

Finally, this round table is the opportunity to discuss how UNESCO could continue to contribute to what I conceive as a joint responsibility of all specialized agencies and programmes of the United Nations: to provide an effective mechanism for the UN General Assembly to review regularly the status of the ocean and to adopt the necessary corrective policy measures at the highest level.

Thank you.