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Our seas are sick - can knowledge and innovation provide the cure?

*Check Against Delivery
Seul le texte prononcé fait foi
Es gilt das gesprochene Wort*

Closing session of Euromares 2010 on the occasion of the European Maritime Day

Gijón, 19 May 2010

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Allow me, if you would, to first thank the organisers of this event for bringing together an impressive number of stakeholders and experts under the EUROMARES flag, to discuss such a wide range of pressing issues.

Research, innovation and sustainability – these three words could sum up my former job as European Research Commissioner and my current one as Environment Commissioner. They are concepts that I am very familiar with and they are themes which underpin both jobs. The theme of sustainability - in all senses of the word, but particularly environmental sustainability, is something that means so much to our citizens. But if we really want build sustainable policies and practices, we need better knowledge.

And these Maritime Days are an excellent example of the importance of pooling knowledge – that essential resource. Some people wonder what conferences are for; these last two days have been an example of why they can be so valuable... to have the direct input of experts and stakeholders on the development of sustainable maritime policies has been extremely useful. I am convinced that the last few days will make a significant contribution to our future endeavours. And it has been an education for me too, as a relatively new Environment Commissioner.

As the title of this event implies, we need marine research and innovation if we want to make our sick European seas healthy again. It is a title I can certainly live with.

In one of today's sessions, you discussed the concept of "Good Environmental Status", which is the final objective of the Marine Strategy Framework Directive. We are currently in the implementation phase of the Directive and Member States are expected to have achieved Good Environmental Status by 2020.

The Directive adopts an integrated approach, which also enables us to cooperate with third countries in working towards Good Environmental Status. In this way we can ensure effective implementation by using the opportunities provided by the Regional Conventions of HELCOM¹ for the Baltic Sea, the Barcelona Convention for the Mediterranean, the Bucharest Convention for the Black Sea and the OSPAR Convention for the North-East Atlantic.

However, during this implementation phase, we are learning that the Directive has a weakness – one I might say that is shared by much of our environmental policy – and that weakness is the lack of knowledge.

When we look at challenging domains such as noise, marine litter or the integrity of the seabed, we are far from having a complete picture. The complexity of the marine environment is a further obstacle to measuring the impact of human activities on marine ecosystems.

These unknown variables pose a real problem for decision-makers. They need to be identified and addressed in a systematic way. And while we need to acknowledge the differences and diversity of our seas, there are some issues which can only be adequately addressed on a European scale.

This brings us at this point in time, to a crossroads.

We need to use the current political momentum and awareness of the deterioration of marine ecosystems to move towards long-lasting and structured solutions. As someone who believes in the power of research, and as an observer of the fall-out from Copenhagen, I am aware that environment policy depends on sound science and reliable data.

¹ **Baltic Marine Environment Protection Commission**

A key starting point has to be the coordination of research. This would not only help us to avoid duplication of research efforts, but it could trigger further cross-sectoral research that takes account of the complexity of the marine environment. One suggestion could take the form of permanent research structures or mechanisms that institutionalise scientific exchanges and pave the way for an integrated approach to research activities.

Another idea is the Joint Programming Initiative on 'Healthy and Productive Seas and Oceans'. I supported this as European Research Commissioner, and I think it could help us bridge the 'needs gap' between research and the environment. It has yet to be approved by the Competitiveness Council of Ministers, but could give us the information and measurement capability we need to assess the state of our seas and oceans (including their biodiversity, the potential for a marine bio-economy and marine renewable energy, for example) and make the policies we need to ensure their long-term health. The JPI idea is useful because it builds links at all levels, in the Institutions and at the level of the regional seas.

These are suggestions, but of course they are not the only ones. And while this event is just coming to a close, we should not lose the considerable momentum it has created. Our seas are still there – and so are the problems we face in making them and the ecosystems that live in them, productive, clean and healthy.

There is an old African proverb which says "A boat will always have its destination as long as the port is there".

We know where our ports are...we just have to make sure we know how we can dock at them!