

**Welcome Address at International Conference on ‘Sustainable Whale and Dolphin Watching Tourism in IORA Region’ Organized by the Institute of Policy Studies of Sri Lanka (IPS), International Whaling Commission (IWC) and the Government of Australia, 24th-26th February, 2016 at Taj Samudra, Colombo**

Hon. Gamini Jayawickrama Perera, Minister of Sustainable Development and Wildlife  
His Excellency Bryce Hutcheson, Australian High Commissioner- Designate in Sri Lanka  
Mr Bruno Mainini, Chair, International Whaling Commission  
Ms Pia Simonsen, Deputy Director, IORA Secretariat  
Distinguished participants,  
Ladies and Gentlemen:

A very good morning to all of you

It gives me a great pleasure to welcome all of you to this ‘International Conference on Sustainable Whale and Dolphin Watching Tourism in IORA Region’ jointly organized by the Institute of Policy Studies of Sri Lanka (IPS), International Whaling Commission (IWC) and the Government of Australia.

We are delighted to have with us Hon. Gamini Jayawickrama Perea, Minister of Sustainable Development and Wildlife as the Chief Guest and H.E. Bryce Hutcheson, Australian High Commissioner-Designate to Sri Lanka as our Guest of Honour. We are also delighted to see all the delegates from the International Whaling Commission, IORA Secretariat, Department of Environment of the Government of Australia, IORA Member States, and others. I trust that our foreign delegates have overcome the jet lag and ready for two full days of intensive discussion and debate.

IORA Member States in September 2013 adopted the Perth Principles – a declaration for peaceful, productive and sustainable use of the Indian Ocean and its resources. These principles recognised the important contribution that marine life and ecosystems can provide for sustainable development across the region, helping livelihoods of numerous people of the member states that depend on those resources.

Whale and dolphin watching tourism offers a great opportunity for combining environmental conservation and economic growth objectives, thus creating conditions for a win-win situation. A tendency towards this can be observed in recent years, as many Indian Ocean rim countries have witnessed significant growth in whale and dolphin watching tourism. A good example for this is Sri Lanka. For a nation, which is looking forward to bounce back after three decades of a costly war, an unprecedented growth in tourist arrivals has become a great blessing. Since 2010, Sri Lanka has witnessed over 300 per cent growth in tourist arrivals. Whale and dolphin watching tourism has emerged as a new form of attraction for rising number of tourists. Not only for foreigners, it has in fact become an attraction for rising number of local tourists that enjoys the benefits of post-war economic revival and improved security conditions.

Nevertheless, achieving sustainable outcomes cannot be taken for granted and are not automatic. As well known, marine ecosystems and ocean life forms such as whales and dolphins are a part of the so-called global commons, which are actually open-access in their nature. Open access resources, unless managed with great care, are vulnerable to overexploitation and succumb to pressures from human actions. Hence, great care must be exercised in managing whale and dolphin watching tourism, if we are to achieve the desired sustainable outcomes—i.e. growing opportunities for income must be prudently combined with conservation of biodiversity. The true value of today’s conference arises from understanding of this reality.

In this backdrop, IORA must work together to ensure that growth in the tourism sector is socially, ecologically and economically sustainable in the long term to the benefit of all member states. Working together, the Member States can look at: (1) commercial and economic benefits that can be reaped from maintaining sustainable tourism operation over the long run; (2) incentives for conserving the marine biodiversity for future generations; (3) opportunities to promote women’s empowerment by developing women as industry leaders and champions of best practices, and; (4) look at educational, environmental, scientific and socioeconomic benefits. A fruitful collaboration of all stakeholders from the member states may help to build the profile of the Indian Ocean region as a major tourism destination for responsible whale and dolphin watching. This conference can provide a major boost for

building such cooperation thereby becoming a historical milestone in sustainable whale and dolphin watching tourism in the IORA region.

The key expected outcomes of the conference are:

- Sharing experiences and expert advice on best practices that can be adopted in the region;
- Evaluating the need for an IORA Whale and Dolphin Watching Network that can work together towards the development of sustainable whale watching tourism in the IORA region, and;
- Developing a 'Road Map for Sustainable Whale and Dolphin Watching Tourism' in the region.

The Road Map will enable IORA Member States to work towards a consistent regional best practice approach to whale and dolphin watching tourism. Moreover, it would become a part of broader IORA efforts to enhance tourism, the Blue Economy, and sustainable development in the Indian Ocean that will complement other activities.

In this backdrop, the IPS along with the IWC and the Government of Australia brings together different teams of professionals from the tourism industry, environmental management authorities, research institutes and universities, NGOs and civil society to facilitate a dialogue on the key challenges and opportunities for sustainable whale and dolphin watching tourism in the IORA region. By working together for supporting sustainable tourism development, I am confident that we can not only improve the economic opportunities, but also create conditions necessary for sustainable management of marine and coastal ecosystem services for future generations. Therefore, I hope this worthy effort will not be an one-off exercise; rather this will be the stepping stone for future series of collaborative activities towards achieving the common goal.

I would like to take this opportunity to thank both the Chief Guest and the Guest of Honour for joining us today, despite their busy schedules. I would like to extend a special thanks to Mr. Mainini and Ms. Simonsen and their staff at International Whaling Commission and the IORA Secretariat respectively, for helping us making this international workshop a reality. Special word of gratitude goes to Dr. Jillian Grayson and Dr. Suzi Heaton of the Department of Environment of the Government of Australia for their tireless efforts in coordination and for sponsoring this all important conference. Thanks are also due to Edwina Sinclair, Second Secretary of the Australian High Commission in Colombo. Needless to say, my thanks also go to the IPS staff involved with this conference.

Finally, I welcome you all once again to this important international conference and thank all of you for your valued presence.

I hope you all will have productive two days of deliberations. And I also hope that the outcome of the workshop will not get unnoticed in future development in the whale and dolphin watching tourism in the IORA region.

I thank you.