

EU-Arctic Dialogue – Brussels 4 March 2015

Statement by

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Ladies and gentlemen

Let me begin by thanking the organizers for arranging this seminar on a topic of great importance. After taking over as Minister for Foreign Affairs of Iceland in May 2013 I have devoted considerable time and effort to Arctic Affairs. It is a subject that is highly important in so many ways – especially to the four million people living there, but also to so many outside of the Arctic.

For Iceland, being the only Arctic State that is squarely within the Arctic, the natural riches of the Arctic have since settlement shaped our livelihood and history.

When looking back on Iceland's history for the last 100 years, one of the central challenges for Icelandic governments remains to implement policies that balance utilization and protection to ensure sustainable development. We have tried to follow this balancing act in our policies towards living marine resources in the ocean around Iceland as well as on-land.

This process has taken decades to develop and implement. Our most recent national park, Vatnajökull national park, established in 2008 is

a valuable reservoir for our hydropower plants and covers some 14% of the total area of Iceland, nearly 14 thousand square kilometers, or an area close to half the size of Belgium [30,278 km²].

Our development in building up renewable energy capacity in Iceland has been of great benefit for our economy. It has substituted coal and oil to the extent that today almost all of our energy needs, apart from the transportation and fishing vessels, now run on clean energy.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Managing the marine resources in a responsible manner is a matter of fundamental importance for Iceland. Indeed, our economic independence has rested on being able to harvest the riches of the ocean in a sustainable manner.

For decades we have strived for this.

Going back to 1901 Iceland declared a fishing limit of three nautical miles which remained in effect until it was extended to four miles in 1952.

As scientific knowledge of the fisheries resources increased it became clear that some of the most important fish stocks, most notably the cod stock, were under severe pressure by multinational fleet. Strict fisheries management was needed to prevent overfishing.

Iceland faced an uphill battle for decades to expand the Exclusive Economic Zone from four nautical miles to twelve in 1958, 50 miles in 1972 and finally to 200 miles in 1975.

The United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea codified this extension of coastal State national jurisdictions. Iceland was the first Western state to ratify the Law of the Sea in 1985 and it finally entered into force in 1994.

For Iceland, sound fisheries management has laid the foundation for transforming and modernizing our society and earning export revenues to develop our economy.

Making sure that we leave today's resources in better condition for future generations is a central theme in our policies. The link between science and decision making has to be coherent and consistent.

Consequently, stock assessments and scientific fisheries advice are the foundation for our decisions on resource utilization.

Ladies and gentlemen,

One issue of particular concern to us is migrating fish stocks. We have witnessed in the last few years that traditional patterns of migrating fish stock in and around the Icelandic Economic Zone have been changing. We see new species entering our waters and others changing their migrating habits. Capelin, herring and mackerel seem to be the most affected. These are important changes connected to

climate and environmental changes and call for increased scientific cooperation on a regional level.

When discussing fisheries management it is also important to remember that there are both direct and indirect subsidies that distort and disturb the economics of the industry. Iceland has advocated for the need to end government subsidies to fisheries, which are destructive to sustainable management.

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The second part of this panel discussion is “what is the role for the EU?”

The European Union and its member states have a valuable role to play given the EU’s international scope and clout. The institutions here in Brussels, as well as the capacity, resources and knowledge present in the EU member countries is important.

Three EU countries are also members of the Arctic Council and many more have an observer status in the Council.

Some of the biggest issues we face are of global importance, such as how to reduce greenhouse gas emissions. These challenges can only be addressed in a constructive international effort.

Good cooperation also takes place within international organizations, such as in the International Maritime Organization, which sets rules for shipping in the Arctic waters to increase safety of maritime traffic.

The Arctic Council is the main forum for the countries in the region to cooperate. Within a few weeks the Canadian Chairmanship will end at the Arctic Council's Ministerial meeting in Iqaluit and the two years chairmanship of the US will begin.

The Arctic Council has commissioned many reports and analyses of various subjects relevant to the Arctic. Just recently the second Arctic Human Development report was published and other reports that are relevant for the discussion here today include the Arctic Biodiversity Assessment, the Arctic Ocean Review and the report on Ecosystem based Management in the Arctic.

Lastly, I want to briefly mention that as the caretakers of the Arctic, the eight Arctic states have a special role to play and a big responsibility. What is happening in the Arctic has repercussions beyond our region. Climate change, shipping, economic development and environmental changes in the Arctic concerns us all.

The Greek philosopher Heraclitus said: "Everything changes and nothing stands still". This is certainly true in the Arctic.

Building on decades long cooperation Iceland will remain a constructive partner among the Arctic States and we welcome the willingness of countries and organizations from outside the region to cooperate and collaborate with us.

Thank you for your attention.