

Inaugural Address of CIESM President, HSH Prince Albert II of Monaco

Venice, 10 May 2010

Madame le Ministre,
Excellences,
National Representatives of CIESM Member States,
Mesdames, Messieurs,

It is for me a privilege and a great pleasure to inaugurate the 39th International Congress of CIESM – the Mediterranean Science Commission – in the world-known Palazzo del Cinema.

On behalf of CIESM and of the many National Delegates who proudly represent their countries here today, I will express, first of all, our warm gratitude to the Italian Authorities:

- to the Minister of the Environment, H.E. Stefania Prestigiacomo for her kind invitation, allowing us to assemble once again in this great country;
- to the local and regional Authorities for their warm words of welcome and for their assistance in hosting us in the Serenissime City;
- to CNR, and to ISMAR, to Dr Zonta, Dr Trincardi and their collaborators, for overcoming the many obstacles that are always the companions of such enterprises.

I shall not forget our Consulate of Monaco in Venice: you gave us your full-time attention and assistance in these last months, which made it possible to translate the wishes and hard work of our Headquarter's Congress Team into reality.

We are grateful to you all, for making this unique event happen in time. Thanks to your efforts, thanks to the enthusiasm of hundreds of scientists from 40 countries who often traveled long distances to be here, thanks to the tireless work of our own Congress Team, this 39th Congress is already out of the ordinary as the largest-ever Assembly of our Commission.

Nearly 1,000 scientists shall participate in the 50 different sessions that will the course of the week. This represents a 30% increase in numbers over our last Congress in Istanbul in 2007, that was already a large success. Held every three years, the CIESM Congress has become a major showcase for the latest advances in marine science, and the largest 'rendez-vous' for marine research in the entire Basin. We can all be very proud of that.

Not only the largest but also the most diverse. As you will note in the programme, as you will hear and see all around you during the week, our Commission brings together all members of the vast Mediterranean family. This broad geographic and thematic diversity, combined with the best science, is our most precious capital. And it is a testimony to the vitality of marine research in the Mediterranean / Black Sea perimeter. Obviously CIESM is on the right tracks and is doing well. Our Director General and his team deserve our recognition for steering, Congress after Congress, our Commission to higher and higher levels.

It is always with immense pleasure that we return to Italy. Our links with this country, one of the nine founding Members of CIESM, are ancient, and they are close. Following our Preliminary Conference in Rome in 1914, Italy hosted no less than five CIESM Congresses. The first of these took place in 1926, and it was already here in Venezia. I have been told that 45 oceanographers were in attendance then. What a incredible jump: from 45 marine scientists to 1,000 expected this week ...

This is the first time since 1926 that our Commission returns to Venice. For many of you this will be a first visit to a city where human genius and water interplay like nowhere else. A visit here is always profoundly moving, as it shows the fragility and vulnerability of all things human when confronted with the forces of nature.

Venice' prosperity came entirely from the sea, protected by a mighty Arsenale that we will visit at the end of the week. With their back turned to an unsafe shore, the merchants of Venice were drawn early on to points far beyond the horizon. They established a trading coastal network that extended all the way to Byblos on the Levantine coast, and to Tana in the Sea of Azov. The Maritime Republic of Venice became so influential indeed that the entire Adriatic Sea was called the 'Gulf of Venice' all through the Middle Ages.

I am inclined to think that it is dialogue and trade between shores east and west, and between shores north and south that produced the richest hours of our Mediterranean Sea ... while battles, crusades, conquests brought mostly despair. I cannot help but reflect that in the immediate aftermath of the battle of Lepanto, the center of gravity of the western World abandoned the Mediterranean Basin for good. There are echoes of all that when one wanders here in this prodigious maze of canals, ancient palaces and narrow streets.

Closer to us, exactly 100 years ago, my great grandfather Prince Albert the 1st inaugurated the Oceanographic Museum which he called the 'Palace of the Sea'. He was, as you know, among the main inspirers, and the first President, of CIESM. The Prince was a navigator, an explorer driven by his love for science. At the same time, he was a celebrated humanist who created the Institute for Peace in 1903. In that sense he was, I believe, profoundly modern and a visionary. The dual foundation of our Commission on science and peace likely explains the longevity and the growing appeal of CIESM today. The two most important delegations of scientists to this Congress are from Italy and Turkey. This is a very timely, powerful symbol.

There are scientists from 40 countries assembled here, giving sense and body to the concept that CIESM is a unique, powerful Alliance of researchers without border. Thanks to that, our Commission has come to be recognized and accepted as an 'honest broker' in Mediterranean affairs. This is not the least of its achievements. CIESM must continue to cultivate this diversity. Diversity as a mosaic of ideas, as the last refuge against a bland, uniform globalization of the tastes, of the minds. Diversity of solutions as well. So let us be proud of our differences: as long as there is mutual respect and dialogue, this will produce sparks of inventiveness and creativity.

To read the newspapers these days is like reading a catalogue of disasters. Some, like the major volcanic eruption in Iceland or the tragic tsunami in the Indian Ocean, look more 'natural' than others where the hand of man is clearly visible: Antarctic glaciers retreating, top marine predators being decimated, a massive oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico, huge swarms of jellyfish ... You and I could continue for quite a while.

Large problems like those call for joint actions. Our Commission is very present in this sector, served by its unique network of associate marine stations, and by its proven capacity to engage monitoring initiatives over the long-term. Our current efforts to track tropical signals and to help harmonize marine observatories in the Mediterranean offer a good case in point. Such research is of global relevance. The Mediterranean Sea is not just a fragile system, highly impacted by man, it is also a barometer of the World Ocean which provides early warning signals on ecosystem changes that are far less easy to detect in the vast, remote open ocean.

I find it always inspiring, whenever I am confronted with nationalistic fervor, to think about this unique CIESM ability to mobilize and unite researchers from cultures that are so different. To give an example, during my journey to Antarctica last year I made a point to visit nearly all the polar laboratories. This was an eye-opening experience. Research stations lost in the ice, separated by thousands of kilometers, proudly pursuing national programs under their national flag. What struck me the most was the similarities among individual researchers: station after station, all showed the same, genuine enthusiasm for science, for discovery ... Such moments convince you that it is politics and ideologies that divide people, and not much else. Political leaders could learn a few things, perhaps, from scientists when it comes to transcend strictly national interests for higher pursuits.

Our Commission will tirelessly continue to be a bridge, a facilitator between all shores of the Mediterranean. This involves shaking hands – this is the nice part – but also leading complex battles on various fronts. We are fighting at the moment for the protection of Mediterranean marine genetic resources, and for the intellectual property rights of coastal nations, making sure that the huge economic benefits to be derived from marine biotechnology will go first to Mediterranean countries and not to private, foreign interests.

The growing importance of our region for the European Union brings in turn an increasing cooperation between our Mediterranean Science Commission and the EU. Europe has bravely and rightly proposed to reform, unify, modernize maritime policy and governance in its waters. This is a tall order. And particularly so in the Mediterranean Sea, which is not simply a southern European sea but also the northern sea of Africa ('il mare d'Africa' for l'Arioste) and the 'White Sea' (Ak-deniz') for our Turkish friends. In any case it is certainly 'Mare Nostrum' ... which gives Mediterranean populations an obligation to adopt and enforce modern standards, to set up a realistic Mediterranean Sea regime. This will take time, for sure, but this ambition is not utopic: we are dealing with a regional sea, not the global ocean. And is there any other viable option ?

Our relation with the EU is a dialogue. The learning process cannot be one way; it must be two-directional. One of CIESM role is to make sure that European Authorities rightly consult and incorporate the views of non-EU countries when shaping marine policy. Hence the great value of a Congress like ours which weaves such a rich network of knowledge.

Finally the message of researchers cannot be just for the good of other researchers. To be heard outside of their ivory tower, scientists must engage into new modes of dialogue with civil society. This will be illustrated this week by several Congress Panels that will explore innovative ways for CIESM to cooperate with fishermen, biotechnology ventures, or the maritime industry.

This is already visible in a number of CIESM programs. For example TransMED where oceanographers collaborate with the merchant marine; and our pilot JellyWatch Program

which is a template for what we call 'citizen science'. I know that Frederic Briand, our Director General, will elaborate upon that in his presentation.

These last years have seen a large number of initiatives, mostly political, aiming to federate Mediterranean actors. While it is necessary to encourage such initiatives, in fairness we must recognize that they are still far from having met their objectives. The Mediterranean Region is a complex mosaic, rich of its history and many great civilizations. In such a dense context, a strong commitment over the long term is an obligatory key to success. Such is the main lesson learned by CIESM over its 100 year-long history. Its capacity to survive so long, while bringing growing numbers of Governments and scientists onboard, makes it a very valuable example to study for any new initiative in our region.

Dear friends,

I wish you all a very productive, excellent week marked by stimulating, fruitful exchanges. I now declare officially open the 39th International CIESM Congress.