



Ministerial Statement
By
The Hon. Walter Roban, JP, MP
Minister of Home Affairs
Friday, 14th June 2024

World Oceans Day 2024

Mr. Speaker, Honourable Members of the House, and people of Bermuda, I rise today to acknowledge and commemorate World Oceans Day, which we celebrated on June 8th. This global observance serves as an important reminder of the vital role our oceans play in sustaining life on Earth. Bermuda, as a big ocean island, is intimately connected to the health of our surrounding waters. Our culture, economy, and very way of life are deeply intertwined with the ocean. Therefore, it is fitting that we take this time to reflect on the significance of our marine environment, celebrate our achievements in ocean conservation, and reaffirm our commitment to protecting this invaluable resource for future generations.

The oceans cover more than seventy percent (70%) of our planet's surface, produce at least fifty percent (50%) of the planet's oxygen, while absorbing about thirty percent (30%) of carbon dioxide produced by humans. They act as a critical buffer against climate change. They support a wealth of biodiversity, provide food and livelihoods for millions, and are a source of inspiration and recreation.

Bermuda's Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) is approximately four hundred and sixty-four thousand (464,000) square kilometers, much larger than our land mass, making it one of our most significant natural assets. Our waters are home to diverse marine species, which support the healthy functioning of our marine ecosystems. The health of our coral reefs, seagrass beds, and marine life is paramount to the ecological and economic stability of our island. Thus, protecting our marine biodiversity is essential.

Mr. Speaker, Bermuda has long been a leader in marine protection and conservation. Our early establishment of coral conservation measures and fisheries regulations, such as the protection of parrotfishes and fish spawning aggregations, have been instrumental in assisting Bermuda's coral reefs to continue to provide critical ecosystem services. These include buffering the island from the worst effects of storms and supporting our fisheries. In recent years, the Government of Bermuda has introduced several initiatives to assist with maintaining the health of

our coral reefs and restoring health to degraded nearshore marine habitats, such as seagrasses.

Mr. Speaker, I would like to take this opportunity to highlight some of these important works, as follows:

Control of Invasive Species:

Efforts continue to control the invasive lionfish. This is being accomplished largely by volunteer cullers with approved special permits to spear lionfish. The efforts are well coordinated by the ***Bermuda Lionfish Taskforce***. This year to date, approximately one thousand five hundred (1,500) lionfish have been removed from our waters.

Additionally, ***the Invasive Alien Species Act*** was introduced in 2021, followed by their associated Regulations in 2022. These pieces of legislation were created to combat the importation, breeding, sale, and intentional propagation of invasive species.

Protection of Sharks:

Legislation was introduced in 2022 to ban the taking of all sharks, except Galapagos, Gummy and Six-Gill sharks, which are now restricted to allow only commercial fishermen to fish with a licence. While sharks have not been targeted on an industrial level by our commercial fishery, they have been heavily fished in the North Atlantic Ocean around

Bermuda. As such, shark numbers have drastically declined. This in turn has meant little control on the population and feeding behaviour of green turtles on the Bermuda Platform. This has led to overgrazing of Bermuda's seagrass beds and the collapse of this critical habitat. It was therefore important for Bermuda to do its part in protecting important shark species.

The Seagrass Restoration Project:

Since 2020, efforts have been ongoing to restore seagrass habitat in Bermuda's waters. Seagrass restoration areas have been created around the Island by placing large mesh cages over sparse seagrass areas. This essentially creates a refuge from turtle grazing and allows the seagrass to recover. A seagrass sanctuary has also been created at ***The Lagoon*** at Ireland Island by fencing off the area using grates at entry points.

Additionally, with the help of a Bermudian PhD student, the Government is investigating the planting of Manatee grass. Manatee grass has certain characteristics that should allow it to recolonise areas more quickly than Turtle grass.

Mr. Speaker, despite these efforts and achievements, we still face significant challenges to the health of our ocean. Chief among them is climate change. Rising sea level and sea temperatures, ocean acidification and increasing storm intensity pose risks to our invaluable coral reefs, mangroves, seagrasses, and coastal areas. Bermuda has taken

a proactive stance in international forums, advocating for stronger climate action, and participating in global initiatives to protect marine biodiversity.

It is important for us to continue to innovate and collaborate to increase Bermuda's resilience to climate-related threats. Ongoing initiatives include:

The Bermuda Ocean Prosperity Programme (BOPP),

The BOPP aims to provide a framework that supports the sustainable management of ocean resources, coordinates decision-making for marine-based development, ensures that twenty percent (20%) of Bermuda's marine waters are designated as fully protected, **marine protected areas**. It also provides a strategy for the sustainable growth of the blue economy, particularly to the renewable energy, sustainable fisheries, and blue tourism sectors. An updated draft of the Blue Prosperity Plan was released in April 2024 and is currently undergoing a review process by an independent panel.

Marine Enforcement Strategies:

To strengthen Bermuda's marine enforcement and compliance, the Government has been working with the UK through the ***Blue Belt Ocean Shield Programme*** and with the US Coast Guard. Enforcement is

also supported by the Royal Bermuda Regiment Coast Guard who provide assistance to our fisheries wardens.

A Marine Enforcement Action Plan has been developed as part of the BOPP, which when fully implemented will continue to help with the coordination of these efforts.

Transition to renewable energy:

Bermuda is committed to transitioning to cleaner energy sources.

Reducing our carbon footprint and promoting renewable energy, both in the marine environment and on land, are critical components of our strategy to mitigate climate change impacts.

The Water Resources Amendment Bill:

The Government will imminently be inviting consultation on updated Water Resources legislation. This legislation will aim to increase protection of our groundwater resources, as well as limiting pollution to the ocean.

Plastic Pollution

Single-use plastics are a major pollutant of our oceans. Although much of the plastic that accumulates around Bermuda's shores does not originate from our island, we are intensifying efforts to do our part to reduce plastic waste through public education campaigns, promoting

reusable alternatives, and developing stricter regulations on single use plastics in phases.

Mr. Speaker, Bermuda's ocean conservation actions also extend beyond our EEZ. Bermuda continues to play a leading role in the stewardship of the Sargasso Sea, in areas beyond national jurisdictions, through the ***Sargasso Sea Commission***. Our efforts have been crucial in advocating for the conservation of this unique and globally significant ecosystem, which serves as a nursery, breeding ground, feeding area and migratory corridor for numerous marine species. These include endangered species such as the American and European eels. The first treaty for high seas biodiversity conservation, known as the ***BBNJ***, was adopted last year. This treaty will open new conservation tools for the Sargasso Sea and as such it may possibly be among the first proposals for area-based management.

Mr. Speaker, the responsibility of ocean stewardship does not rest solely with the government. It requires the collective effort of every citizen, business, and organization in Bermuda. In recognition of World Oceans Day, I call upon each of us to consider the impact of our actions on the marine environment. Simple changes in our daily lives, such as reducing energy consumption, purchasing legally caught local seafood, reducing plastic use, and participating in beach cleanups can make a significant difference.

In closing, I believe that together we can ensure that Bermuda remains a beacon of marine conservation and a testament to the power of collective action. Let us celebrate the beauty and bounty of our oceans while recognizing the urgent need to protect them. Bermuda's future is inextricably linked to the health of our marine environment. By continuing to lead in ocean conservation and fostering a culture of sustainability, we can ensure that the ocean around us remains vibrant and productive for generations to come.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.