

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Dear Friends,

Mirabeau once famously said: “Law is the sovereign of the world”. The sentiment certainly applies on land. But we have to admit that the law often appears to be absent when it comes to what in fact makes up the majority of our planet’s surface: the oceans. As I see it, there are two main reasons for this.

The first relates to the complexity, the extent and the diversity of the spaces and issues involved. The sea comprises a multitude of realities, regions, depths, ecosystems, economic activities and different problems...

This explains the shortcomings of the Montego Bay Convention, which cannot regulate everything with a single text. The consequence of this is an accumulation of conventions and institutions, which does not promote clarity, coherence or effectiveness of international activity in this area: the FAO deals with fisheries management, the UNEP is responsible for environmental issues, the IMO for navigation, UNESCO for scientific issues, and so on.

The second explanation relates to the fact that the problems – or at least the perception that we have of them – have radically changed in nature over the course of the past 25 years.

The ocean, which for millennia appeared to be an infinite force from which humans had to protect themselves, has gradually revealed itself to be a fragile entity. A world which humans threaten more and more each day.

And so, the very function of the law has changed. It is no longer there solely to defend and reconcile the interests of different peoples and different nations. It must also cover future generations and the ecological balances which are fundamental to our future. For our desire to protect the oceans is in fact a reflection of our desire to protect our children, by seeking to leave them a viable world, much like the one that was bequeathed to us.

Progress has been made over the past 25 years, resulting in positive developments in this area. Other initiatives are underway, such as the work currently being done within the UN on the Montego Bay Convention with regard to what is known as BBNJ, in other words the establishment of rules relating to the preservation of biodiversity beyond areas of national jurisdiction.

But we must go much further, supporting all the initiatives launched on a number of specific topics, many of which have been mentioned.

For my part, I would like to raise the issue of the extended continental shelf, and along with it, the ability of governments to appropriate off-shore resources.

I would also like to mention the status of the high seas and the sea bed in these areas. They are an asset shared by all humanity and are currently governed by international regulations which are piecemeal and in some cases opaque, making it difficult to gain a comprehensive overview.

I would like to refer to the polar regions, which are particularly dear to me, and the hope that we will see the part of the Arctic Ocean which is located beyond the Arctic Circle become a marine protected area, dedicated to research, as has been the case with Antarctica for more than 50 years.

More broadly, the marine protected areas which we discussed yesterday require more appropriate tools in order to develop.

Finally, there is the issue of enclosed or partly enclosed seas. Although they are mentioned in the Montego Bay Convention, they also present problems. I am of course thinking of the Mediterranean which is, as you know, at the heart of my concerns and the focus of many activities carried out by my Foundation.

But with regard to all of these subjects, I would like to finish by saying that there is the law and then there is reality.

Having participated in the majority of international summits on the environment since the Rio Summit in 1992, I have often noted the extreme difficulty of building a consensus on these issues. I therefore think that it is important that reflection does not give way to the temptation of a maximalist approach, which is often utopian. For, if law is the sovereign of the world, it must always make compromises with political realities.

Let us not forget that the tools exist, however imperfect they may be. But while it is interesting to reflect on how they can be improved, this should not detract us from local initiatives or voluntary agreements between countries and regional organisations dedicated to the sea.

Thank you.