

Speech De Backer

Your Serene Highness,
Esteemed colleagues and representatives,
Ladies and gentlemen,

It is my honor and privilege to wish you all a warm welcome here in Brussels. As cohost of this conference I'm very excited to see that so many people gathered here today to talk about these extremely important topics.

Oceans cover more than 70 percent of the earth's surface, yet we have only explored less than 5 percent. We have better maps of the moon, than we have of the oceans. This ignorance translates itself in different kind of ways. It seems like only recently the political interest turned to the ocean to understand its vital importance for the survival of our planet and our species. Surprisingly, until now, the world of climate negotiations and the multilateral ocean scene have interacted very little.

This is why I and minister Marghem and I deemed it necessary to take action and organize this meeting. Belgium may be a small country, but when it comes to ambition, I can reassure you: Size doesn't matter. We have tried to be an ambitious pioneer in several domains, including marine and climate topics.

For example: We were the first country to introduce and implement the concept of marine spatial planning, because we wanted to find answers on to questions such as: How can we reconcile economic activity with ecological goals and the preservation of our ecosystem. It allowed us install to a large capacity of offshore windpower in the North Sea. We are currently carrying out scientific studies to analyze the possibilities and conditions to increase our offshore windpower while preserving the marine environment

Knowing that over 80 percent of all trash ends up in the sea and oceans, we were also the first country to adapt a marine litter action plan. At the same time we are fueling the fight against microplastics by making Blue Deals with for instance the cosmetics sector.

Guided by the targets agreed under the Convention on Biological Diversity, we have also been fervent supporters of the UN process that will lead to the adoption of a legally binding instrument on biodiversity in areas beyond national jurisdiction and, in particular, allow for the international community to create marine protected areas on the High Seas, that will significantly contribute to ocean resilience, including resilience against climate change.

As a maritime nation, with 338 ships crossing the earth's surface under our flag, we have also considered it our duty to make sure that international shipping also does its part in the fight against CO2 emissions. Although international shipping was excluded from the legal scope of the Paris Climate Agreement, we have played a vital role in setting up the High Ambition Coalition to reduce CO2 emissions of international shipping.

Our curriculum shows that it doesn't matter how big or powerful an organisation or country is in order to make a difference. It matters how willingly you are to make that change. As Michael Jackson sang: Start with the man in the mirror. Then look for partners and start building a coalition of the willing.

Of course, to make this work, we'll have to find fitting solutions. Therefore, we need to strengthen our efforts and combine forces and knowledge. As a scientist, I believe in bringing ideas together and discussing solutions based on scientific and economic facts. That's the goal of this conference: Developing evidence-based solutions that make economic sense.

By being here, you have expressed your commitment to finding those solutions. We are seeing the same thing happening in several city centers all over Europe. People of all kinds who are coming together and who want to make that change. It marks a growing understanding that we are all in this together and that it's time to act.

I would like to thank you all for taking that first step and expressing your interest. I wish you all a very interesting and pleasant stay. And remember today: Ask not what our ocean can do for us, Ask what we can do for our ocean.