Inception Workshop of the Sustainable Seabed Knowledge Initiative

Seocheon, Republic of Korea

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STATEMENT
by
H.E. Mr. Michael W. Lodge
Secretary-General of the International Seabed Authority

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Dr Wan-hyun Choi, President of MABIK,

Mr. Myeong-dal SONG, Deputy Minister for the Marine Policy Office, MOF

Distinguished representatives,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I am delighted to be able to join you here today in Seocheon for the launch of ISA's latest flagship initiative - the Sustainable Seabed Knowledge Initiative, or SSKI.

I am particularly pleased that this inception workshop is being convened at the National Marine Biodiversity Institute of Korea (MABIK). It is always a pleasure to visit this magnificent facility, see the cutting-edge scientific work you are doing, and learn from the world class scientific team here. Dr. Choi and his team have supported the idea of SSKI from the beginning and we sincerely appreciate your great enthusiasm and your generous hospitality in inviting us all to Seocheon.

Let me also express my sincere appreciation to the Government of Korea for the warm welcome given to me and my delegation since we arrived a few days ago. As a pioneer investor, exploration contractor, and long-standing member of Group B of the Council, the Government of Korea and its agencies, including KIOST, have strongly supported the work of ISA for many years and has participated in many of the scientific and technical initiatives of the Secretariat.

Last Thursday in Seoul, I was delighted to take our collaboration a step further by signing a Letter of Cooperation between the Secretariat and the Ministry of Oceans and Fisheries aimed at furthering our collaboration in deep-sea research and capacity development.

By strengthening our joint research and capacity development actions, I am confident that we can achieve two complementary strategic outcomes. First, we can make a real contribution to advancing scientific knowledge of deep-sea ecosystems and biodiversity in the Area. Second, we can ensure that all countries, including the less technologically advanced countries, are able to participate effectively and build their own scientific expertise leading to better ownership of the results generated.

I would also wish to extend my gratitude to the European Union for its financial support to SSKI and to welcome the representative of the EU in Korea to Seocheon today. We share a common commitment to the core mission of ISA to protect the marine environment and ensure sustainable use of the ocean and its resources.

I very much welcome, therefore, the reference in the joint communication by the High Representative on the EU's International Ocean Governance Agenda to the EU's commitment to support ISA's Action Plan for Marine Scientific Research in support of the United Nations Decade of Ocean Science.

Turning to the subject of this week's workshop, it is important to put our work in context.

The world relies heavily on natural resource exploitation, and the demand is growing. The energy transition creates a demand for minerals that are critical in terms of availability and location. Marine minerals are increasingly a part of this overall picture. Poor practices, whether on land or at sea, damage the environment and human health.

Deep-sea exploration has been taking place since the 1970s under the framework of the international law of the sea. Although much of the underlying interest in marine mineral resource potential is a response to a societal need, these exploration activities have also contributed to remarkable gains in our collective knowledge of the deep-sea environment and biodiversity.

This would not have happened without ISA, which since its establishment in 1994 has set the parameters for the conduct of exploration work through regulations. Exploration may be conducted only under contract to the ISA and in accordance with ISA's rules, regulations, and procedures. From the outset, ISA's

regulatory system has prioritized the collection of environmental data. Collectively, since 2001, ISA contractors have spent more than $260 million on environmental studies of exploration areas.

ISA has organised a series of workshops on deep-sea taxonomic standardisation since 2013. The outputs of these workshops have translated into improved standardisation and quality of data in DeepData and enhanced connections with other existing biodiversity databases, such as OBIS.

Today, DeepData is growing and thriving. It hosts over 158,000 data records on species abundance, including nearly 60,000 occurrence records, of which one third have been named to species level, i.e., about 2,000 species.

SSKI poses us with the challenge of leveraging this work and increasing the number of described deep-sea species by at least one thousand by 2030. I am confident that with your support we can be even more ambitious.

As we progress in our core work of developing an effective regulatory framework for all activities in the Area, improved species knowledge and classification are critical to generate data and information on marine biodiversity that is necessary to support our work. Better tools and data quality, as indicated in the SSKI proposal, will help to strengthen the scientific basis for programmes to monitor impacts on the marine environment as well as management measures adopted under regional environmental management plans.

That is why standardising and innovating methodologies for biodiversity assessment in the Area, including taxonomic identification and description are among ISA's top research priorities and are recognized as such in ISA's Marine Scientific Research plan in support of the UN Decade of Ocean Science.

We need to start with a strong and inclusive network of scientists who can collaborate through a global knowledge-sharing platform.

This is the core purpose of SSKI. We aim to facilitate an interdisciplinary nexus between governments, scientific communities, international organizations, and relevant industries to co-generate data and co-create information on deep-sea biodiversity, facilitate access to these data and make use of them to ensure an effective policy-science interface.

For instance, SSKI aims at enhancing environmental DNA (eDNA) as a non-destructive, cost-effective, and easily replicable methodology for studying deep-sea biodiversity to facilitate deep-sea species identification and quantification that feed into planning and monitoring of the Area.

If we work together, we can integrate and innovate taxonomic tools, including enhanced reference libraries of images and DNA sequences to facilitate species identifications, and build a new generation of deep-sea taxonomists. I want to call on your support to continue working together to deliver these objectives.

I wish you a fruitful discussion and look forward to the outcomes of the workshop.

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