

Opening of the Conference on Ocean Biodiversity Informatics

Welcome Address by Prof. Dr. Peter Ehlers, President of the Federal Maritime and Hydrographic Agency (BSH), Hamburg/ Rostock

When two years ago my agency, the BSH, accepted to organise the next meeting on oceanographic biological and chemical data management we did so as we are very much interested in this issue. Operating as the German Oceanographic Data Centre and closely cooperating with IOC and ICES we appreciated very much to get this opportunity to show our commitment with regard to this topic. We expected that the meeting would be similar to a previous workshop held in Hamburg in 1996. However, during the preparation it became larger and larger and now has grown up to a proper conference. I must admit that we had some doubts whether we really could cope with this challenge to organise such a conference which due to the large number of participants could no longer be hosted in our own premises. We were lucky that we got support by the German Ministry for the Environment enabling us to hold the meeting here in the Academy.

So it is my pleasure now to welcome you very cordially to Hamburg. I am quite sure that you have chosen the right venue for such a conference as Hamburg is the maritime centre of Germany. Not only because the BSH is located here, but in Hamburg you find various other , marine scientific institutions, you find the International Tribunal for the Law of the Sea. And Hamburg Port is one of the biggest container ports world wide.

Last week I had the privilege to speak at the opening of an international conference dealing with marine geomatics. This is now succeeded by the international conference on ocean biodiversity informatics. Both the conferences are covering comparable objectives: information technology and the marine sphere.

Is that only a pure coincidence? I do not think so. It demonstrates that information technology is increasingly dominating our life and that also means: our work. Do you remember Y2K? Year two kilo - the year 2000? The change from the second to the third millenium? When there was great fear that all our computer systems would break down? They did not. But were we only lucky? Or was that nothing but a .fantastic promotion activity of the computer industry? Whatsoever. This event made evident that we have entered the information age. We experience that day by day. Not only by using the mobile phone and sending emails. Much more important is that information technology enables us to collect

inconceivable amounts of data, to process them automatically, to assimilate them, to assess them and to develop new information products. This also covers activities concerning the marine sphere.

This brings me to the second aspect. We live at a time which coming generations probably will characterise as the beginning of the maritime age; The seas, the oceans play an increasing role for our life, and maybe for the survival of mankind. The uses of the seas are steadily expanding. That is not only true for traditional activities such as fisheries and shipping. But that also includes aquaculture and marine biotechnology as well as the use of non-living resources: oil and gas, sand and gravel - and in the further future also gas hydrates. Moreover we are looking for renewable energy from the sea, which is actually demonstrated by offshore windparks; in the longer run we may also use tides, waves and currents for the production of energy. And let me additionally mention the increasing worldwide tourism concentrating on coastal and marine areas.

At the same time we know that the oceans are the greatest and quite vulnerable ecosystems. We have to undertake all possible endeavours to protect and preserve the oceans and to ascertain that they are only used in environmentally friendly and sustainable manners. When we started our efforts to protect the marine environment we primarily focussed on the minimisation of pollution, and that means on the quality of the sea water. However this quality is not an end in itself, but it has to be seen as an indicator for the status and the health of marine life. Therefore our ultimate aim must be to preserve marine life, and a very important element of that is the conservation of marine biodiversity. An indispensable prerequisite, however, is a profound knowledge about what is going on in the oceans and about all the different species living in the marine sphere. And honestly we have to admit that our knowledge still is very poor.

We know that the earth's biodiversity is disappearing, with an estimated 1,000 species per year becoming extinct. This was reflected by the Rio Conference 1992 and the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) which is designed to reverse this trend by improving the conservation and sustainable use of biological diversity. One of the seven thematic work programmes initiated by the convention is expressly addressing marine and coastal biodiversity.

From its start the convention has recognised that scientific knowledge and technological know-how have to play a vital role. For this reason, the Convention established a "Clearing-House Mechanism" to ensure that all governments have access to the information and

technologies they need for their work on biodiversity. But do they really have? Let me make a quotation from this conference's web site: *We know very little about the biodiversity in the world's oceans. But one thing is sure: the diversity of the data types and information that is stored in data systems around the world is increasing dramatically.* Therefore the topic of this conference is not only justified, but is highlighting an urgent need: to optimise marine data management, and I avoid saying marine biological data, as for much too long we used the traditional approach to manage the marine environment in general, and marine resources in particular, and by sectoral planning.

What we need is the integration of the different data or data-types. That is a pre-requisite for a good management of the oceans, or a bit more diffident, a pre-requisite - to understand the oceans. And it is my understanding that this requirement is covered by the objectives of your conference which is focussing on biological data, but beyond that is dealing with aspects of marine data management in general!.

So my sincere hope is that you will make good progress at this conference. That this will be an important step forward towards establishing integrated data systems which will enhance the cooperation of all those who are interested in the sustainable use and protection of the marine sphere.

Good success for your work. And have a good time here in Hamburg.