

**Remarks of His Excellency, The Honorable
Tommy E. Remengesau, Jr.**

*10th U.S. Coral Reef Task Force Meeting
October 3, 2003*

Good Morning, I am very honored to be here today to discuss the issues of our worlds, the United States' and this region's coral reefs. I greatly appreciate this opportunity for Palau to participate, as a non-voting member of the U.S Coral Reef Task Force.

Let me begin by saying that I am very pleased that you have chosen to hold this year's joint regional meeting in Guam and Saipan. I believe that this is a clear recognition that the Micronesian region is very unique and very important when it comes to discussions of the preservation of the world's coral reefs. It is also a clear recognition of the unique and historical relationships that Guam, the CNMI and the Freely Associated States have with the United States.

Ladies and Gentlemen, it has become absolutely clear that the world's growing population, humanity's increasing resource consumption and the impacts of climate change are straining the Earth's natural resources. This is especially true when we discuss the worlds' coral reefs.

As we all know, the world's bounty is not limitless; it must be studied, managed and nurtured. Our struggle to preserve our natural environment requires finding an appropriate balance between economic development and sustainable resource consumption. The time is now to creatively review our response to this universal attack on the environment through the unsustainable exploitation of the world's resources by humankind. The facts are clear. Biodiversity is declining a thousand times faster than its natural rate. Half of the tropical rainforests and mangroves have already been lost. About 75% of the marine fisheries have been fished to capacity and 70% of coral reefs are endangered. We must reverse this process now before it's too late.

These extraordinary environmental issues that are facing the world are especially vital to the small island communities. We are the front line of defense in the world's battle, and if the battle is lost here, it will ultimately be lost everywhere. Palau is recognized internationally as one of the most biologically diverse places on Earth. Our marine environment is host to over 1,400 species of fish, 400 reef-building corals, and thousands of other marine invertebrates. In some ways, you might say that we have the most to lose.

This is why Palauans historically have taken our oceans, our marine life and our coral reefs very seriously. Our ancestors knew how to sustainability manage their resources in less complex times. For thousands of years, our predecessors were successful in sustaining their way of life. If they were not, we would not have our forests, mangroves, fish species, and many other unique wonders that the Pacific Islands are renowned for. Unfortunately, somewhere along the way, some of us determined that the 'old ways' of our ancestors were obsolete. I believe that they were wrong. Now we must reconsider, re-group, and merge traditional resource use practices

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with new technology. We must return to traditional practices, such as the traditional 'Bul' in Palau to reconstitute the Earth's environmental balance. This is especially true in the new world, one that is far more complicated and one in which our vulnerability is far more pronounced. We must also reach out to organizations such as the Task Force to learn all that we can about the science of our environment.

Despite Palau's conservation tradition, despite Palau beauty, despite Palau's remoteness, Palau has not been able to avoid the impacts of global climate change. The 1998 coral bleaching event brought mortality to our reefs that we have never experienced before. We have been subject to ship groundings, crown of thorns infestations and sedimentation from development and resource overexploitation. The people and the government of Palau have been taking numerous steps to overcome the impacts from these international and domestic realities.

Today, we are attempting to incorporate the method of our ancestors while simultaneously integrating the messages of science into our planning design. In Palau, our vision is to know, to understand and to manage in order to protect our children's future. To know, we must re-educate all of our people in the realities of our environment. To understand, we must research and study in order to build our base of knowledge. And to manage, we must merge the traditional wisdom with what science and technology can tell us. This requires that we join the international efforts relating to the preservation of our coral reefs.

Ladies and Gentlemen, Palau wants to participate – Palau wants to contribute. And Palau is committed to work with the Task Force in order to maximize the ongoing efforts of both the United States and Palau. I believe that Palau has much to offer.

Not only does Palau have its traditional wisdom to offer, it has a long, and some of you might think, surprising, history of scientific research in the area of marine life and coral reefs. Palau was the home to the first permanent marine research laboratory in the Western Pacific. Palau was also the location where giant clam mariculture was first developed. In fact, Palau, due to its marine biodiversity, has been a hotbed for the past 25 years in marine natural products research as evidenced by more than 150 technical papers. Today, Palau is the home base for the U.S. National Cancer Institute's marine collection program. In addition, Palau has been selected as a pilot jurisdiction for a world-class scientific project to determine practical mechanisms to increase reef resilience to Climate Change.

The leadership of Palau, over the past years, has developed many initiatives at the national level to begin to address this attack on our environment. In 1994 we passed the Marine Protection Act, a model legislation that integrates modern science with traditional knowledge to respond to the attack on the marine environment. We also have pending in our legislature a law that would greatly expand our marine protected areas. Just last month, we passed a shark finning law that not only prohibits shark finning, but also places restrictions on commercial fishing within 50 miles of our islands. We have also put in place much of the governmental management structure that prioritizes the environment in our national planning process.

But ladies and gentlemen, much still needs to be done if we are to achieve a balance between economic development and the preservation of our natural environment. In order to be successful

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in preserving our coral reefs and marine resources, it is imperative that we establish a sound regulatory framework and enhance our technical capacity to undertake the work required. With this in mind,

- Palau is interested in and committed to partnering with the Federal members of the Task Force as well as our colleagues in the All Island Committee and the freely associated states to pursue the goals and objectives set forth in Executive Order 13089;
- Palau would like to enter discussions with the Task Force regarding Palau's contributions to a network of Marine Protected Areas as a means of protecting our biodiversity on a regional scale; and
- Palau stands ready to work with the Governors of the US Flag Pacific Islands and the Presidents of the Freely Associated States in developing a regional Sea Grant consortium focused on developing the capacity of our institutions of higher education to train our young people and future leaders in coral reef and related marine resources management.

Palau gratefully recognizes the commitments already made by NOAA through funds they are providing to the Palau International Coral Reef Center and to the Department of the Interior Office of Insular Affairs for their support of MAREPAC as an instrument for developing regional capacity in marine resource sustainability.

I would like to conclude by personally inviting members of the Task Force to come back and visit our islands, enjoy our islands hospitality and engage in dialog on how we can ensure the perpetuation of our coral reef resources as a lasting legacy for our children and all citizens of the world.

Thank you for this opportunity to participate in this 10th meeting of the Task Force and I look forward to a bright future for partnerships and collaborations.