

Address by

The Hon. Said W. Musa

Prime Minister, Minister of Education and of the Public Service

At the Ceremony Officially Inaugurating the Caribbean Regional
Fisheries Mechanism

Princess Hotel, Belize City

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Mr. Master of Ceremonies, Honourable Ministers of Government , Secretary-General Carrington and staff of the Caribbean Community Secretariat, Your Excellencies of the diplomatic and consular corps, Members of the Clergy, Senior Fisheries and Agriculture Officials, distinguished delegates and special invitees, members of the media, Ladies and Gentlemen.

We are not an island, but we are a people of the sea. From the Maya and Garinagu seafarers to the myriad cultures that have combined to make our Belizean people who call this place home, we feel at one with the sea. We are blessed with a seacoast of xxx miles, all of which is protected by the longest barrier reef in this hemisphere, dozens of islands, and three of the Caribbean's four atolls. The sea is part of us.

But there is another sense in which we are not an island, and in which none of our Caribbean partners in this project are islands either, and that is in the sense that none of us can exist or develop apart from each other, that we each need the others of our family in order to satisfy the needs of our peoples and create the environment necessary for them to live dignified and quality lives.

The Establishment of the Caribbean Regional Fisheries Mechanism allows for the participation in the capacity as observer of our non-CARICOM Caribbean neighbours. Belize, which has been the bridge uniting CARICOM to the Central American Basin, looks with anticipation to future fisheries collaboration with other Central American States and with Mexico, Venezuela, Cuba and the Dominican Republic.

The Caribbean Regional Fisheries Mechanism will provide the platform for this cooperation in sustainable growth and rationale management of fisheries in the Region. Its work must also emphasize the integrated value of fisheries to other sectors of the regional economy, poising us to take advantage of new opportunities to add value and thus increasing national revenues leading to improvement in the quality of life for a significant portion region's population.

The Marine environment of the Wider Caribbean features complex and dynamic ecological systems. . The rich potential of the Caribbean Sea provides countless socio-economic and cultural benefits to our Caribbean people. It is an important food source. It generates significant employment in a range of economic activities that are major contributors to the region's income.

The Fisheries sector of the region is vibrant and dynamic and shows good prospects for continued positive and long-term growth. This sector is comprised mainly of small-scale fishermen applying simple and traditional fishing practices with minimum capital requirements and high labour demands. Apart from fishing, aquaculture has been making an increasingly significant contribution to the economies of the region since the mid 1980's.

Fisheries represents a critical sector in the economies of the Small States of the region in an era of globalisation and the erosion of preferential markets, which our traditional crops such as sugar, citrus and bananas once enjoyed. Since the adoption of the United Nations Law of the Sea Convention in 1982 in Montego Bay, Jamaica, the fishing industry of Belize has been responding to the new requirements of both the global and national market place. Caribbean governments and stakeholders of the industry have been working in coordination with each other to ensure the responsible and sustainable utilization of the fisheries resources of the region.

Marine parks are a tool in fisheries management to assist the education of stakeholders and the general public as well as the conservation of the aquatic resources of the Nation.

Some of you will have the opportunity on today's field trip to visit the Hol Chan Marine Reserve for a first hand experience of Belize's success in the application of the protected Marine park concept to Fisheries and Coastal eco-system management. These marine protected areas also provide employment and income since they have become major tourist attractions.

The sustainable development and conservation of the fisheries and aquatic resources of the region is constrained by a number of factors which are either directly or indirectly related to inadequate human and institutional capacity for planning and management, inadequate knowledge of the resource systems as well as the values and expectations of those who are dependent on these resources for their livelihoods. The lack of appropriate harvesting and processing technology, limited range of products and inadequate marketing and trade arrangements for fish and fishery products has hitherto hindered the optimisation of regional fisheries efforts.

CFRAMP, the Caribbean Fisheries Resource, Assessment and Management Project has over the past decade enabled our member states to address these challenges by gathering information and building the Caribbean's capacity for management and development of the industry.

I wish here to acknowledge the generous contributions received over the past decade from our international partners in development, particularly from Canada through the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA), The United States Agency for International Development, the Membership of European Union, the Government of Japan, and through collaboration with the Food and Agriculture Organization.

The establishment of the Caribbean Regional Fisheries Mechanism or the CRFM will promote and facilitate closer cooperation among Caribbean States and perform functions that are supportive of national fisheries administrations in the development and management of the fishery resources under their jurisdiction. The CRFM will also ensure that the needs, perspectives and concerns of all states are not marginalized by larger powerful states at international activities.

Belize takes seriously its role as venue for the Headquarters of CRFM. There is a high level of political commitment to the success of this new regional mechanism, which will no doubt benefit from the attractive attributes Belize has to offer in its role as host.

I also encourage CARICOM Fisheries to take advantage of the potential for synergy with existing national institutions such as our own Fisheries Department, Fishing Cooperatives, Non Governmental Organizations such as the Belize Audubon Society , The Toledo Institute for Development and the Environment (TIDE), The Belize Coastal Zone Management Authority and Institute in furtherance of common objectives.

Belize already plays host to regional organizations such as the Meso-American Barrier Reef System and the Caribbean Centre for Climate Change, whose work programmes are of significant relevance to sustainable management of coastal resources.

It is my hope that my own role as the CARICOM Head of Government with Regional responsibility for Sustainable Development and the Environment may lend itself to the benefit of this Mechanism.

We will ensure that the goals and purposes of the new mechanism remain consistent with those of major United Nations Conferences on Environment and Sustainable Development by balancing promotion of sustainable fisheries development and conservation of the region's fish stocks with concerns of regional fisher folk relating to loss of employment and revenue due to diminishing stock and habitat degradation.

To my Caribbean colleagues I say, please accept our gratitude at your selection of Belize as Headquarters for the CRFM, our pledge of continued support to this vital regional endeavour and my best wishes for the successful outcome of tomorrow's scientific, administrative and technical deliberations at the inaugural meeting of the Caribbean Fisheries Forum.

I thank you.