

Addressing Marine Plastic Litter and Microplastics

Held over 35 years ago to this date, the *United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea* (UNCLOS) resulted in the establishment of the international law of the sea, the principles and rules that a nation must follow regarding all maritime matters, including pollution in marine environments. The Gabonese Republic is concerned with the violation of this essential international law, as it is directly responsible for the governance of 71% of our Earth. Gabon, serving as the host and President of The African Ministerial Conference on the Environment (AMCEN) from 2017-2018, clearly understands the social, political, and economic implications of the environmental harm of marine plastic litter and microplastics. As a developing coastal nation, Gabon has begun to combat the issue head-on, creating Africa's largest network of marine protected areas (MPAs) at 20,500 square miles, providing a home to many threatened marine populations due to marine plastic litter, including the largest breeding populations of leatherback and olive ridley sea turtles and twenty species of dolphins and whales. First adopted by Member States at the 2002 World Summit on Sustainable Development, the *Johannesburg Declaration on Sustainable Development* stressed the importance of the creation of MPAs. As of 2018, only 3.4% of the oceans were classified as MPAs. Gabon calls the international community to follow our example and work with us to create nation-specific legal frameworks in order to further protect areas of the ocean and restore the biodiversity harmed by marine plastic litter and microplastics. Along with biodiversity health, Gabon also recognizes the human health implications of marine plastic litter and microplastics, due to the number of known carcinogens that plastics consist of like dichlorodiphenyltrichloroethane (DDT) and polychlorinated biphenyl (PCB), a direct violation of accomplishing Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 3.4.1. Gabon is dedicated to upholding our citizens' human right to health, as professed in the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*. Adopted in 2011, *The Honolulu Strategy* lays out the framework for the international community on reducing the ecological, human health, and economic impacts of marine plastic litter. Gabon has led the charge on this issue regionally, as our capital of Libreville hosted the African ministers responsible for health and the environment to draft the *Libreville Declaration on Health and Environment in Africa* and more recently, adopt a ten-year framework to direct funds toward joint health and environment initiatives. The human health issues caused by marine plastic litter and microplastics are not only a direct violation of our human right to health, but they also come accompanied by economic challenges. The increase of health issues drives the demand for more health infrastructure, a necessity in accomplishing SDG 9.1, yet many developing nations do not possess the capacity to expand upon or upgrade their current infrastructure. Gabon requests the assistance of The United Nations Development Programme's (UNDP) Infrastructure Sector to help provide capacity development assistance for least developed and developing nations who do not possess the capacity necessary to expand upon or upgrade their current infrastructure. Other branches of economic issues that are dramatically affected by marine plastic litter and microplastics are within the Blue Economy. Gabon has put an emphasis on ecotourism as a way of diversifying our economy, laid out specifically in our 2025 National Vision and SDG 8.9. Gabon realizes the damaging effects of marine plastic litter and microplastics on ecotourism, as many tourists will not want to visit the beautiful beaches of our nations if plastics are consistently washing onto our shores from the excess production and consumption by other nations. Economic diversification is a struggle that links many developing nations, especially in Africa, and is essential to the accomplishment of SDG 8.2. Another way of economic diversification is through the fishing industry. Gabon realizes the threat of marine plastic litter on the global fishing industry, as millions of dollars are lost each year from the contamination of fish from the consumption of marine plastic litter and microplastics. Gabon requests assistance for least developed and developing nations to send representatives to the United Nations University-Fisheries Training Programme to help ensure quality assurance systems in the seafood industry are in place, specifically to detect seafood contaminated by plastics. Gabon realizes that in order to accomplish the SDGs, the environment must be at the forefront of our attention. Addressing marine plastic litter and microplastics encompasses each and every one of the lofty seventeen goals that were unanimously agreed upon, making it an essential area of focus for the protection and restoration of our Earth.