

NATIONAL STATEMENT – COOK ISLANDS
UNEP INC1 MONDAY 28TH NOVEMBER 2022

E uu no te akau roa ka oki rai ki te akau roa. – The fish will always return to the reef it came from.

I am Tohoa Puna a proud Cook Islander. The Cook Islands have 15 islands scattered across 2 million square kilometers of ocean.

Most of you are familiar with Small Island Developing States or SIDS, but not so familiar with our remote outer islands far from the busy main island, which is where I come from. I hail from the outer islands in the Cook Islands called Aitutaki, Atiu, Penrhyn and Manihiki. Just 200 years ago, my ancestors lived off the land and sea sustainably, regenerating nature every day, where we give back more to nature than what we take.

Today, we are taking more and more from nature – a direction my ancestors would have never imagined for me - their tupuna, their generations. Today, my islands are overwhelmed with a plastic crisis that we cannot manage. We have overflowing waste management facilities, full of toxic waste like plastics that we bury, burn or live with. The shores of our remote islands are full of washed-up plastic waste from all over the world – we are the new colonies of others waste.

At the same time, we continue to receive plastics in almost every product, toxic or non-toxic, harming our environment, our ecosystems, our food security and our health and wellbeing.

I am here today because I believe in this global treaty as our last hope to end plastic pollution. I believe that you will do the right thing and do what is right. I am here to ask that we all work together to:

1. Develop a legally binding instrument that addresses the full life cycle of plastics – starting from sourcing, upstreaming, mid-streaming and down-streaming;
2. Support the development of a specific convention where core obligations and some control measures appear in the body of the instrument, giving the governing body the possibility to be adapted in the future throughout adjustment, amendments and protocols;
3. Promote a non-toxic circular economy approaches to addressing plastics;
Ensure equitable, adequate means to participate in the design of the instrument and its implementation, including support for capacity building and technology transfer. This should be a priority for Pacific SIDS who are on the front line of the plastics pollution crisis.

In conclusion, I stand not only as a Cook Islander I do so as represent, but as youth, an indigenous person, and a woman, fighting for our remote communities. We must not wait until we have killed off all our marine life, replaced by plastic. We must act now and make the bold steps to end plastic pollution. *E uu no te akau roa ka oki rai ki te akau roa.* – The fish will always return to the reef it came from. What will the fish return to reef or plastic? *Meitaki Atupaka*, Thank you.