

Opening Ceremony of
the 4th International Conference on Marine Pollution
and Ecotoxicology

*Speech by the Deputy Secretary for the Environment, Transport and
Works (Environment and Transport) E1, Ms Doris Cheung*

2 June 2004

Professor Ko, Professor Randall, Professor Wu, ladies and gentlemen,

It gives me great pleasure to welcome all of you to Hong Kong and to the 4th International Conference on Marine Pollution and Ecotoxicology. This is a most timely event. Timely because the theme of the United Nations World Environment Day scheduled for 5 June is *Wanted! Seas and Oceans — Dead or Alive?* The theme asks that we make a choice as to how we want to treat our seas and oceans. It also calls on each and every one of us to take action. Do

we want to keep our seas and oceans healthy and alive, or polluted and dead?

In the case of Hong Kong, the marine environment, in particular the Victoria Harbour, has long been the heart of our history. Back in the 19th century when we had a population of only some 3700, about 2000 were fishermen who counted their living on the sea. Thanks to our natural deep and calm harbour, Hong Kong has now developed into an international commercial centre and navigation hub. Our bustling harbour is not only famous for housing the largest container terminals in the world, but also for its stunning beauty – which wins us the praise of the “Pearl of the Orient”. Every year, millions of tourists flock to experience her wonders and bring tremendous economic benefits to Hong Kong. Clearly, protecting our marine environment should be on the top of our agenda, if we wish our harbour to remain as a prime attraction, and the engine of our economy.

What I have just mentioned above covers only the human perspective of the significance of marine protection. Although our marine area is small in size (only some 1800 km²), it is the home of a rich variety of flora and fauna of high ecological value. It may sound surprising but Hong Kong actually has more species of stony coral than the Caribbean. We are also the home of rare and important species such as the Chinese White Dolphin and Finless Porpoise. Moreover, our famous Mai Po RAMSAR site is the resting place for thousands of migratory birds stopping by Hong Kong every year. Undoubtedly, these “permanent residents” and “regular visitors” of Hong Kong would also wish that we can share a clean marine environment with them.

Given the significance of a clean marine environment to Hong Kong, this Government has accorded top priority to formulating and implementing strategies to reduce marine pollution and improve

our water quality. In this regard, the large volume of wastewater generated by our population (which amounts to 2.6 million cubic metres per day) constitutes the single largest source of pollution to our marine environment. Accordingly, we have been focusing our efforts on three areas to tackle the problem – first, we control pollution at source through rigorous enforcement of environmental legislation : we have enacted the Dumping At Sea Ordinance to prevent damage to the marine environment by dumping of waste in local and international waters. We have also brought all of our coastal waters under the comprehensive pollution controls provided by the Water Pollution Control Ordinance and the Waste Disposal Ordinance; secondly, we have invested some \$19 billion since 1991 in expanding and upgrading our sewerage network for collecting sewage generated in the whole territory; and thirdly, we have been providing efficient sewage treatment facilities at strategic locations to treat our sewage and dispose of it properly. In particular, we have embarked on the multi-billion dollar Harbour Area Treatment Scheme (HATS)

to improve the water quality of our harbour. With our continuous efforts over the past decade, we have achieved some very encouraging results:

- Over 95% of our population is now served by the public sewerage system. In terms of sewage flow, 98% of Hong Kong's sewage generated is collected for treatment before disposal.
- Following the commissioning of Stage 1 of HATS in December 2001, there has been tremendous improvement to our harbour marine environment. The sewage treatment works at Stonecutters Island, which is a key component of Stage 1 and widely recognized as one of the most efficient chemical treatment plants in the world, is now removing 70% of organic pollutants in terms of biochemical oxygen demand. It also prevents some 600 tonnes of sludge from entering our

harbour every day.

- Our efforts have also resulted in long term sustained improvements in the water qualities of rivers, marine water and beaches. As at 2003, more than 75% of our rivers are of “good” or “excellent” water quality; overall 34 out of 41 gazetted beaches (83%) meet the WQO for bathing water; and the compliance rate of the marine water quality objectives has also increased to 87%.

However, we are not complacent. We are fully committed to improving our marine environment and keenly aware that more needs to be done if we are to cope with future growth. To this end, we will be consulting the public shortly on the recommended way forward for the second and final stage of HATS, in which we will propose to expand the existing chemical treatment plant and provide new disinfection and biological treatment facilities. Apart

from HATS Stage 2, we will also continue to invest some \$5 billion in other sewerage infrastructure projects over the next five years.

Protecting the marine environment from pollution is a continuous challenge. I would like to take this opportunity to thank our ecotox leaders, in particular, Professor Randall and Professor Wu who have been contributing positively to the various ecotox testings and criteria developments using local species. Through their research work, we have accumulated much knowledge and understanding of the effects of our discharges on the local environment. Such information is of profound significance in the development of our water quality improvement strategy and long-term planning of our sewerage infrastructure. I particularly welcome this International Conference for providing a forum to enhance our knowledge and help us review options for further work and future initiatives. Of course, the significance of this International Conference is not just limited to the local context.

Indeed, it helps to remind us that our local problems are just part of a much wider global issue. By strengthening cooperation through conferences such as this, we can all work together effectively to protect our marine environment. I look forward to receiving your expert advice and would like to wish the Conference every success and our overseas participants a most enjoyable stay in Hong Kong.

Thank you.