

Your Royal Highness,
Mister President,
Ministers,
Excellency's,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is a real pleasure for me to introduce this afternoon of dialogue on the future of the Arctic. This event organised by Greenpeace and Qed and held under Chatham House rules, is particularly important not only for the future of the Arctic region but also for the whole of our planet as we try to tackle climate change.

I would like to extend a warm welcome to Mr Nakkalajarvi, President of the Saami Parliament of Finland, Mr Tuomioja, Minister of foreign affairs of Finland and Mr Gunnar Bragi Minister of foreign affairs of Iceland and all the distinguished guests here today to attend this meeting.

I would like also to thank Mr Jean-Marie Delwart, a scientist, ethologist and vibrant advocate of the natural world who is kindly hosting this event in his house.

Argenteuil is a very special place. A sanctuary for wildlife and biodiversity close to Brussels as well as a historical home. For me, it is also full of memories of my childhood. My father, King Leopold the Third lived here for 23 years and my mother, Princess Lilian, for 42 years. They were both passionate about science and Nature.

My father was a pioneer in the field of the environment. As early as 1933, he addressed the Royal African Society in London emphasizing the importance of protecting our environment. He stated that contrary to our ancestors who could argue ignorance, we, with our increasing knowledge about the consequences of the destruction of our environment, could not justify ourselves to future generations.

I inherited from my father his interest for conservation and sustainability.

It is a recognised fact that ever since men started their journey on earth, they destroyed other species to survive. Then, discovering the richness of the soil, they exploited it, disfigured mother earth, leaving less and less space and food for the other living creatures. Humans embarked on a massive destruction of nature which has continued down the centuries.

In 1923, with a great sense of humour, the British physicist and writer Havelock Ellis noted: "The sun, the moon and the stars would have disappeared long ago... had they happened to be within the reach of predatory human hands."

Acting like the master of the universe, man has killed, looted our resources, deforested, polluted, all without concern for the other species or the harmony of Nature or, for that matter, future generations.

But in the last fifty years, attitudes have been changing. Thanks to the actions and lobbying of Greenpeace and other NGOs, governments and individuals are realising the positive effects of protecting the environment, to preserve our health, to provide food, to maintain social cohesion, to promote tourism to name but a few.

Many conservation projects have emerged and the results have been beneficial. After the Convention on Biological Diversity in 1992, numerous programs addressing threatened species and habitats have been implemented to restore biological systems.

As a source of beauty Nature has always attracted people, making them aware of the necessity to restore the balance and live in harmony with it. However, a less romantic reason comes from the economic potential of green politics. The pharmaceutical industry, for instance, knows well the importance of natural products for new drugs. Investment in the search for sources of sustainable energy will help to solve the energy crisis which will soon confront human society.

We have to become more effective in using the resources without damaging the environment. The results so far are encouraging but they are still marginal. One quarter of all mammal species and one third of amphibians are threatened, deforestation is still happening at an unacceptable rate also over fishing and carbon emissions have yet to start reducing.

In its recent annual outlook, BP, one of the largest oil companies, indicated that the world economy would double in size in the next 20 years resulting in demand for energy rising by almost 40%. The report shows that two-thirds of this demand would be met from fossil fuels - oil, gas and coal - and that this would lead to a 25% increase in carbon emissions.

Not a very promising prospect as we prepare for the conference on Climate Change later this year in Paris...

Nowhere else than in the Arctic, place of extremes, is the situation more fragile. With its 450 different species of fish, 280 species of birds and 130 species of mammals, this area of our world is a global sanctuary. And it has been warming twice as fast as the rest of the planet.

As the ice shrinks due to global warming, the sun is absorbed in greater quantity by the ocean. The water becomes more acidic. The animals are struggling to cope with the change of their habitat and the local population which depend on fishing is struggling too.

But one of the biggest threat to the Arctic is the prospect of oil and mining developments in this region rich with untouched reserves of oil and gas. Offshore oil exploration, drilling and production would affect the whole biodiversity of the region, not to mention the risk of spillage and shipping accidents which would endanger the marine ecosystems.

The risks are simply too high, not only for the people and the wild life of the Arctic but for the whole planet because the smallest of our oceans affects the climate of the world. The circulatory pattern of the world's oceans is what keeps the world's temperatures consistent.

With the ice and snow cover over the Arctic Ocean melting, the heat distribution over the entire earth will change.

David Attenborough, the great naturalist has warned: “The natural world is changing and we are totally dependent on that world. It provides our food, water and air. It is the most precious thing we have and we need to defend it.”

Thank you very much.

I would like now to give the floor to

H.R.H. Princess Laurentien of the Netherlands.

Princess Laurentien has been active in the field of sustainability for over a decade. She is President of Fauna & Flora International, Fellow of the European Climate Foundation, and Founder and Director of the Missing Chapter Foundation (MCF) which brings together children and decision-makers in the private and public sectors to engage in dialogue on themes related to sustainability, among others.

H.R.H. Princess Esmeralda of Belgium

President of the King Leopold III Fund for Nature Exploration and Conservation