



Commissioner Janez POTOČNIK

*The European Research Area and the
Future of Maritime Research*

1st European Maritime Research Policy Conference

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Distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen,

My thanks go to the MARE Forum and the WATERBORNE European Technology Platform for their invitation, and for organising this conference. I am very happy to be addressing such a notable assembly of representatives of the European maritime industries, marine research organisations and public administrations.

And I must say "well done" on the timing, coming only a week after the release of the European Commission's proposal for an integrated Maritime Policy.

The importance of this proposal is difficult to exaggerate. Europe is the second-smallest continent in terms of its land area, but we sit between two oceans and five seas, have a coastline of 70,000km and a great length of navigable rivers.

Even a very brief look at history shows that the actions of Europeans at sea have had a profound effect, not only on our own continent, but across the globe. The exploration that has originated in Europe, the commerce that has passed through it, and the battles that have been fought in its seas have changed the course of history forever.

We have been more influenced by our maritime history than any other continent. And the gathering in this room shows that marine and maritime issues remain crucial to our well-being.

At present, nearly half of the population of the European Union lives near the coast. All of us rely on the marine environment for food, raw materials, energy, recreation and huge amounts of traffic and trade.

At the same time the marine environment is one of the most diverse and important ecosystems on our planet. It is a habitat for a vast number and variety of species and - among other things - plays an essential role in the stability of the climate.

So we harm it at our peril, because we rely on it in so many ways for our health and prosperity. Given these facts, it is clear why we need an integrated maritime policy for the European Union.

The Commission's proposal and its accompanying Action Plan directly address Europe's competitiveness, while seeking to develop our maritime industries in a sustainable and forward-looking way. I find it very appropriate that the Maritime Policy will combine the needs of the sustainable development strategy agreed in the coastal town of Gothenburg with the agenda on jobs and growth decided in the port city of Lisbon.

To achieve this balance, the policy considers the very diverse nature of marine and maritime affairs. This includes the complexity of the "oceans and seas" system and the fragmentation of communities, industrial sectors and governance. The vast range of linkages is clear from nearly 500 contributions received during the public consultation that preceded the maritime strategy.

The linkages are also evident from the wide range of European Union policies with a relationship to maritime affairs. So the proposal targets the relationships between European policies on transport, fisheries, agriculture, enterprise and industry, energy, environment, the regions, employment, security and - not least - research.

In fact, the underlying and vital contribution of research is a theme that runs throughout the document. Research and innovation will be central to the implementation of many of the activities within the Action Plan. These actions include the promotion of a network of maritime clusters, a strategy to mitigate the effects of climate change on coastal regions, the creation of a European Marine Observation and Data Network and an integrated network for maritime surveillance. These and other actions will benefit from the research know-how that you and your European and international partners can bring.

There are many specific examples of much-needed research that illustrate the relationship between traditional marine and maritime disciplines. One is a consideration of the millions of tons of water ballast that are transported and unloaded each day from ships operating between Europe and other continents. This water introduces micro-organisms and small creatures that can seriously damage our local ecosystems. The effects are not only environmental but also economic, with consequences, for example, for the fishing and tourism industries.

Finding a solution is an important research challenge that must draw upon the expertise of marine biologists, environmental scientists and shipping engineers, among others. The solution must not only protect the environment, but must also take into account the day-to-day operational reality of commercial shipping.

Another example deals with the increasing pressures on European ports. In this sector, increased container flows and sizes of container vessels are leading to innovations in the use of floating ports. As well as easing congestion, the move away from traditional ports to offshore operations can reduce the risks involved in the shipment of potentially dangerous goods, such as liquefied natural and petroleum gas.

I am glad to note that the WATERBORNE Strategic Research Agenda is already looking in these directions.

In addition to supporting other activities of the maritime policy action plan, it is a separate and specific goal to develop a marine and maritime-related research strategy for Europe. So I am pleased to announce that in 2008 we will establish a European Maritime Research Strategy.

Starting from a commitment to excellence in research, the ultimate aim will be to support the sustainable development of the maritime industries and the marine environment. The strategy will encourage the development of the existing knowledge and innovation base to exploit business opportunities, such as sea-bed mineral resources, aquaculture and emerging sub-sea technologies.

It will promote new uses of the sea with important growth perspectives, such as offshore marine aquaculture, so-called "blue biotechnologies" and underwater technologies. And it will address the development of offshore renewable energies, reduction of pollution risks and the overexploitation of marine resources.

This strategy will establish for the first time a holistic approach to marine and maritime research, emphasising three important dimensions:

- Cross-sectoral integration of marine science and technology;
- Increased collaboration between different member state research efforts in fulfilment of the European Research Area;
- and better integration of research with policy making and societal goals.

To achieve this requires improved cooperation between maritime research disciplines; between marine scientists and maritime engineers; between energy providers and shipping operators; and between regional developers and tourism. So we will encourage and promote the research and innovation dimension of the maritime clusters and regional centres of excellence that are part of the overall maritime policy.

The European Commission clearly has a role in encouraging and supporting partnerships and coordination. This includes linking political and research priorities, stimulating interdisciplinary programmes between Member States and Community efforts and improving the dialogue between the scientific community, industry and policy makers.

We will rely on the cooperation of the EU Member States and regions, as part of the national integrated maritime policies that are proposed in the Maritime Policy action plan. We will rely also on your support and commitment as industrialists and researchers to achieve these objectives.

Finally, the strategy will tackle the issue of human resources. All the ideals and policies for coordination and application of research are useless without researchers! I refer to skilled and committed scientists and engineers who can take on the European challenges that I presented.

Career choices are often made at an early stage, so demonstrating the fascination of research and rewarding curiosity can be life-changing actions. This is true in the maritime domain as for any other areas.

That is why I am delighted to know that we have with us today representatives of three remarkable teams of European students who are addressing these challenges. It will be my very great pleasure to present them with awards from the Vision Network of Excellence, for their outstanding ideas in the field of maritime engineering and naval architecture.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Before ending, I would like to pay tribute to the WATERBORNE European Technology Platform for its active participation in the debate on behalf of the entire maritime sector. I congratulate you also for the creation of a Vision, a Strategic Research Agenda and a research Implementation Plan that anticipate some of the activities that we will propose in our European strategy for marine research.

Based on the previous efforts and contributions from this community, I have every confidence that this first European maritime research policy conference will produce a stimulating and fruitful debate.

I wish you a very successful event, look forward to your ideas, and wish you all an excellent waterborne future.