

# Speech by H.R.H. the Prince of Orange at the 2009 MARE People and the Sea Conference, Amsterdam, Thursday 9 July 2009

Ladies and gentlemen,

Have you ever heard of Krijn?

Krijn walked the earth around 50,000 years ago. A fragment of his skull was fished out of the North Sea, just off the coast of Zeeland, several years ago. This was the first time the remains of a Neanderthal man had been found in the Netherlands. You can imagine how proud we were. We called him Krijn because that is a popular name in Zeeland.

Krijn lived in the area between what are now the cities of Amsterdam and London. In those days, this area was a green plain, where mammoths grazed, and hunters trekked from place to place. Krijn was a hunter. Tests on the fragment of bone showed that he was a young man who had eaten an awful lot of meat.

In Krijn's day, you could walk from here to the spot where the Houses of Parliament now stand. Centuries later, sea level rose, submerging a great many of our ancestors' hunting grounds. The story of humankind is one of constant adaptation to the demands of water.

Water is the dominant force on earth. It covers seventy one percent of our planet's surface. Seen from space, even the landmass of Asia, Africa and Europe is an island. We are surrounded by the sea. And the sea is in constant motion. It is no wonder that it has always fascinated us.

MARE, the Centre for Maritime Research, is holding its fifth conference in a very special year. It is 400 years since legal scholar Hugo de Groot wrote his *Mare Liberum* in which he contended that all countries should have free access to the seas and oceans. In his view, we should all be free to sail the seas and engage in trade. Every country would benefit. That was Hugo de Groot's message four hundred years ago.

De Groot's ideas were highly influential - and their impact can still be felt. In our times, his ideas have gained a deeper dimension. Because there can be no freedom without responsibility.

If the sea belongs to us all, we are all responsible for managing it properly, for providing our children with a safe future, and for conserving ecosystems.

Earlier this year my wife and I were in Antarctica, where we visited a number of research projects. During our stay we spent one night in a tent. It was minus 30

degrees Celsius outside. In temperatures like that, global warming seems very far away. But appearances can be deceptive. The average temperature on the Antarctic Peninsula has risen by three degrees in the past 50 years.

One of the scientists we met there said that some underwater organisms may lose their ability to reproduce if the water temperature rises by just half a degree. That goes to show how vulnerable marine life is. And how great the impact of human activity is on the tiniest plants and creatures.

Ladies and gentlemen, we live together on a planet that is largely made up of seas and oceans. And that makes us natural partners. Or rather, allies. We all have a stake in this water-rich planet. In freedom and responsibility.

That is why MARE is so important. MARE brings experts and policymakers from different disciplines together to discuss the challenges facing us today and to seek solutions. The title of this fifth MARE conference is 'Living with uncertainty and adapting to change'. This theme is of great relevance to us in the Netherlands.

You may not have realised it at the time, but if you flew to Schiphol airport, you landed 12 feet below sea-level. That means that one of Europe's largest airports is well below sea level. And the same applies to more than half of the Netherlands - the part with the highest population density, where two-thirds of our Gross National Product is earned.

The history of the Netherlands is closely linked to the sea. Our economy, our infrastructure, our spatial planning and our way of life would have been entirely different if the sea had not been so close.

The Delta Project to protect the southwest Netherlands from the sea was launched after the floods of 1953 in which more than 1800 people lost their lives. The plans were there already. But a disaster had to happen before they were acted on.

We want to avoid a similar tragedy happening in the future.

In the past hundred years, coastal water levels have risen by 20 centimetres. According to the climate scenarios, they will rise by at least 65 centimetres, and possibly even 1.30 metres, in the next hundred years. And these figures take no account of subsidence from widespread peat soil compaction we experience in the Netherlands.

And yet we have confidence in the future. We know that our country can still be a safe and pleasant place to live and work in another hundred or two hundred years. Provided we prepare for the changes ahead, and adapt our coastal defences, spatial planning, water management, housing construction, infrastructure and so on and so forth.

We must adapt now, not later. By acting now we can control costs and prevent problems occurring later.

The Netherlands is looking far ahead. We need a Delta programme for the long term to keep the Netherlands safe. And we are working on it.

With a view to the future, prevention is the priority. That is also our message to the international community.

In December this year, the international community will have an important opportunity to take decisions that will guarantee a safe future. I am talking of course about the United Nations Climate Change Conference in Copenhagen. One of the aims of COP 15 is to develop adaptation strategies for the 21st century.

Water management is a key factor. Too often, water is still perceived as a separate sector. An important sector, but one that stands more or less alone.

But the truth is that water is a crosscutting issue that affects practically every area of our lives. Our health. Agriculture. Energy generation. Transport. Nature. Our living environment. Our development opportunities. And our safety.

So safety is just one of the elements we need to factor in to our adaptation strategies. Clean water is another.

How do we ensure there is enough clean water in densely-populated deltas and coastal regions where the risk of flooding is increasing? How can we ensure that water purification systems continue to function properly in the aftermath of a flood? How do we respond to the problem of salt-water intrusion?

We need your help in answering these and many other questions. We need engineers. We need lawyers. And we need social scientists. Not on three different boats, each sailing their own course. But on one boat, where the various disciplines strengthen each other.

That is why MARE is so important. Because MARE brings together knowledge and experience from all over the world.

Ladies and gentlemen, our seas and oceans are and will always be a source of fascination. Life in the depths of the ocean still holds many mysteries, and confronts us with many technological challenges. We can place equipment on Mars, but we cannot find a blackbox on the ocean bed.

Much remains to be discovered and studied. The exact effects of climate change cannot be predicted. Ocean currents may shift. Regions will become wetter or drier.

But what matters is that we are prepared to accept that our world is changing and that we need to respond to these changes. By being flexible, having an open mind, facing reality and seizing any opportunities that may arise.

We are far better equipped for the future than our ancestor Krijn was 50,000 years ago. His descendents were powerless against the elements and ultimately had to surrender their hunting grounds to the sea. But we can influence our future and adapt to the changes that will take place.

Your input is vital. I wish you all a very productive conference.

Thank you.

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