

**Keynote Address on the Opening of
the First Global Island Partnership Strategy Meeting**

by

President James A. Michel

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Ladies and gentlemen, and fellow islanders

We are gathered this morning in the city of Rome, the Eternal City. Cesar Augustus once said "I found Rome brick, I left it marble." In a similar vein, may what we build this week be grounded in marble; a better future for all our islands and a solid foundation on which to build a sustainable future for the world.

As you may recall, in January 2005, leaders from most of the island nations of the world converged in Mauritius for the Second International Meeting of the Small Island Developing States. This meeting followed the deadly tsunami that had hit the Indian Ocean region in December 2004 which had reminded us all of the threat that changes in our environment and specifically sea level rise could pose for our island communities.

The Mauritius meeting was wide-ranging, looking at a number of points which can help empower small islands, including special status in the world trade arena, combating climate change and reversing biodiversity loss, in particular in relation to coral reefs. We have established a means of mutual assistance and support through the Global Island Partnership.

The Global Island Partnership remains one of the most tangible outcomes of the International SIDS meeting. This initiative, called for by the President of Palau and myself, has grown rapidly to help achieve our vision of increased leadership by small island states in determining our own future.

We aim for closer working relationships with islands around the world which share our issues, regardless of size or political status. We recognize that by working in partnership we can launch a unique island movement that could make a difference, that could sensitise the world to the bold steps that still need to be taken.

Our Global Island Partnership is demonstrating how true leadership today is about concrete action at the local level to achieve national and global good.

Unfortunately it is all too apparent in many cases that certain national interests supersede this concept of the global good.

The issue of climate change is the most telling example, which has now led the United Nations to convene a special high-level session on climate change.

The effects of climate change are being felt already in small island states. When you live on an island, climate change is a reality that you wake to face every day. The fisherman sees it every day as he takes to the sea. Every child sees it when returning to his favourite beach to play. But it is perhaps much harder to see from the aisle of a supermarket in the Western hemisphere.

The Arctic is warming twice as fast as the global average and the resulting sea-level rise is being documented around the world. Sadly, in many developed countries, the national per capita greenhouse gas emissions continue to grow at the detriment of more than 40 Small Island States and millions of people living in low-lying areas around the world.

While we need to continue our efforts to empower islands to progress towards sustainable development, it is even more important to engage the world in global action, rather than global debate.

The mass coral bleaching events in 1998, and recurring events in many areas of the planet, is a clear indication that our globe is in a state of peril and we must all move do something tangible about it.

The Global Island Partnership or GLISPA is doing something about it. In less than three years, this partnership has grown beyond our expectations. Without formal structure or dedicated staffing, it has inspired and engaged 20 governments and over 25 global or regional organisations who share this common vision with us. This group spans all the regions of the world and includes leaders from small islands states, large island nations, overseas territories and donor countries. To date, GLISPA has also been instrumental in helping to secure more than 30 million USD in commitments for island conservation, and the list keeps growing. I am convinced that we now have a robust platform to set up a coordination mechanism and to that end I would express my thanks to the Government of Italy, IUCN and the Nature Conservancy for this support. On our part, Seychelles will be supporting this partnership in any way we can, including providing staff support.

The Micronesia Challenge was one of the earliest GLISPA commitments launched soon after our call for GLISPA. It is an outstanding example of how this Partnership is working. The Micronesia Challenge brought five Heads of State together in a shared commitment to effectively conserve at least 30% of their near-shore marine resources and 20% of their terrestrial resources by the year 2020.

The Micronesia Challenge subsequently inspired the government of Grenada to announce its intention to "protect 25% of its marine and terrestrial area by 2020". It was immediately joined by the Bahamas, thereby launching the Caribbean Challenge. To date, all nine members in the Organization of Eastern Caribbean States (OECS) have adopted the Caribbean Challenge in principle, and much work is underway on the ground and at the level of governments.

Recently, GLISPA supported Indonesia's President Yudhoyono efforts to reach out to neighbouring countries to work together to protect the heart of coral diversity in the world, the Coral Triangle.

Just two weeks ago, five island nations and one nation with islands formed a partnership to protect the world's most biologically diverse marine area - known as the Amazon of the seas - from the destructive impacts of climate change, unsustainable fishing and land-based pollution. The Coral Triangle Initiative will seek to conserve and better manage coral reefs, promote sustainable fishing and ensure food security in an area encompassing central Indonesia, East Timor, Malaysia, the Philippines, Papua New Guinea and the Solomon Islands.

At home, in my region, we recently launched the Western Indian Ocean Marine Protected Area Initiative with the support of WWF. This initiative will help us strengthen the management of several established marine protected areas and begin planning new protected areas, with support from the Global Environment Facility.

Seychelles will continue to provide this kind of leadership within the region and globally.

However, we cannot be satisfied with our achievements as the challenges become more intense. We need a renewed approach and this meeting will enable us to focus on future strategic directions. It will allow us to maximise our impact locally and globally, and also strengthen the partnership to address these emerging challenges.

To support this process I have the pleasure, today, to share with you my vision and an announcement which will, with your support and input, provide a mechanism for leveraging attention and focus on the impacts of climate change on Small Island States.

For the past year, the news has been dominated by the shocking break-away and melting of the Arctic and Antarctic ice. It came as a shock to me to see video footage of the extensive melting and its impact on the surrounding eco-systems. The consequences will be dramatic, but we have yet to scratch the surface of how truly catastrophic these changes can be.

Scientific consensus indicates that sea level rise is likely to accelerate from the current 2.5mm to 4mm a year to 13mm and 15 mm a year by between 2085 and 2115. This may not sound significant in vertical terms, but in linear terms this means radically changing the coastscape of the world.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Much of our coastlines have already experienced loss over the last five years. In some areas in Seychelles, we may have lost over 50 m of the coastal plateaux.

We need a mechanism for island states to come together with other partnerships to share knowledge, expertise and know-how. We also need to empower our governments to ensure investments and development meet climate change requirements. Above all we need a mechanism to engage the developed world in providing the required technical and financial support so that we can engage in adaptation to climate change.

Today we have a number of initiatives supported, for example, by the Global Environment Facility. However there needs to be a focussed effort and networking mechanism to bring this issue to world attention and fast-track solutions, technology, capacity and practices to affected regions.

Seychelles is ready to help lead this effort, and today, I am pleased to launch the Sea Level Rise Foundation to galvanize global action to address the devastating impacts of climate change on our planet.

This Foundation will bring resources and expertise together to support small island states, islands and other low-lying areas in adapting to sea-level rise. We are running out of time, and we must combine our resources and know-how to avoid the physical damage and social and economic toll threatening all island societies. We must maintain and restore the natural protection provided by our healthy island ecosystems.

The Sea Level Rise Foundation will have three main roles:

- It will bring together countries, scientists, policy-makers, and other stakeholders to share ideas, technologies and know-how;
- It will provide a platform for public-private partnerships and mainstream sea-level rise proofing guidance to government and developers alike; and
- It will raise resources required to engage all nations in avoiding the first climate refugees, those living on islands and in low-lying areas.

In Seychelles, our first step in this new endeavour will be declaring part of Silhouette Island as a new National Park designed and effectively managed for resilience to climate change, from a biodiversity and sea level rise perspective.

Silhouette is the third largest granitic island in the Seychelles group, lying within a marine protected area and known as one of the most important biological hotspots in the Indian Ocean. Silhouette is known for its virgin and untouched forest and this deserves formal protection. At least 8 species of plants, one endemic family of rare frogs and other biodiversity thrive on Silhouette. But the threat of climate change, invasive species and others are forever looming.

With this new addition, Seychelles will have more than 50% of our land territory under formal protection, in addition to the 14 marine protected areas that have already been designated as such.

On Silhouette, we have the opportunity to partner with two hotels and create a novel public-private-NGO partnership to demonstrate how we can all work together to address those emerging challenges. This is just one example illustrating why we feel the GLISPA vision needs to incorporate collaboration and partnerships with the private sector.

Globally, foreign direct investment is at its all time high in developing countries, including many small island states. How do we leverage conservation, sustainable development and our response to sea level rise and other biodiversity issues, such as invasive species, through these investments? Seychelles has done this with a large degree of success in the past, and we are currently exploring new models of partnerships with the private sector. It is our hope that the Sea Level Rise Foundation will provide an island-driven mechanism to mobilize resources for conservation, restoration and the fostering of resilience in islands around the world.

We are prepared to use our global network, the Sea Level Rise Foundation, our new Silhouette National Park, and all tourism developments ongoing in Seychelles to help lead GLISPA's early work on climate change and private sector partnerships, and share our experiences with other interested islands.

We are hoping that many countries, especially developed countries, and organisations will join us in this effort. We will begin setting up the Foundation's board soon, which will comprise leading global figures. I ask this gathering to provide your input and guidance to help us further develop the Foundation's concept. In particular, help us identify and engage the right countries, organisations, experts and private sector leaders to join us in this global effort.

I would also like to take a moment to stress the importance of research, development and education, as a whole, in our fight against climate change and sea level rise. Earlier this year I announced our desire to create our first university in our island nation. There will be a faculty devoted to research and innovation on environmental issues and which will also serve to provide the world with key data on environmental changes affecting small islands. Dr. Rolph Payet, one of my advisers with us here, today is the Chair of the Seychelles University Foundation and will be driving this project which is also critical to the future of our nation.

Knowledge is the key to empowerment.

In closing, I am very pleased to convey to you that our Partnership is strong and growing. Now, we must decide where we should go in the coming three years. It is time for us to consolidate our work and reach out to more island nations and nations with islands.

It is time for us to focus on a number of key biodiversity areas, including climate change, where this Partnership can catalyze action at a significant scale and lay the foundation for even greater success and impact in the future. We should continue to make the

Partnership grow. Our partnership must include the private sector, as well as governments, NGOs and others.

GLISPA is the platform for islands to have a say and an impact on the ground and in the water. As you move forward to discuss our GLISPA strategy over the next few days, please remember that although our islands are small, together they are very significant in global terms. GLISPA represents the interests of more than 500 million people on more than 130,000 islands. Together, we represent more than 30% of the UN, and thus have the ability to change people's attitudes and actions.

Islands are the bellweathers of international environmental policy.

The world will see their success or failure on our islands first.

I have often been told that our islands are the last paradise. Indeed, I feel blessed to have been born in such a beautiful country. I am also proud that we are the keepers of this paradise not only for ourselves but for the benefit of mankind.

But I am also constantly aware of the fragility of this beauty. I am constantly aware of how easily God's gift can be lost.

Let us all work together to preserve these small pieces of paradise wherever they may be.

I thank you all for coming this week to help chart a course for GLISPA during this exciting and critical time.

Thank you.