022 For a sustainable management of freshwater resources in atolls

CONCERNED about the vulnerability of people living in atolls, particularly in the face of the effects of climate change (coastal erosion, risks of submersion, access to water resources);

RECALLING that water is a vital resource for all humanity, particularly when it is scarce and difficult to renew; that coral atolls have only two sources of fresh water: rain, which, although easily accessible, can become scarce when periods of drought are prolonged, and water lenses, underground aquifers present under certain islets;

FURTHER RECALLING that the presence, volume and condition of these freshwater lenses depend on the size of the islet, the nature of the soil, the surface vegetation and its uses, and that the underground lens represents a substantial or even essential resource for populations whose needs are increasing;

NOTING WITH CONCERN the development of unsustainable practices (tourism, agriculture, etc.) leading to water withdrawals that are too frequent and in too great a quantity, amplified by various types of pollution (waste, landfill and discharges, etc.) which result in the salinization of freshwater lenses, making them unfit for use;

AWARE that pumping has no influence on the volumes of water available, but that it can, on the other hand, modify the balance between fresh water and salt water by raising the transition zone and increasing the proportion of salt water, making the water brackish and causing an imbalance in the ecosystem;

CONSIDERING that all abiotic components of the water cycle – from precipitation and infiltration to emergence – are part of geodiversity and that, in some cases, when these elements have value for people, they can be considered geoheritage and, therefore, should be protected, conserved and monitored;

UNDERLINING that these aquifer resources could become vital for the survival of atoll inhabitants during future crises, whether for agriculture, access to drinking water, food or health; and

OBSERVING the lack of current knowledge on freshwater lenses, whether their physical characteristics or their dynamics;

The IUCN World Conservation Congress 2025, at its session in Abu Dhabi, United Arab Emirates:

1. REQUESTS IUCN to address this issue, which concerns many States in different regions of the world, and which is acute in the context of climate change and rising sea levels;

2. URGES the relevant academic communities, governments and regional organisations to support a programme to acquire knowledge of this fresh groundwater resource on all inhabited atolls, both in its physical characterisation (volumes, water exchanges) and in the study of its dynamics in the face of the multiple pressures to which it may be subjected;

3. ENCOURAGES IUCN and the relevant States and local authorities, once this knowledge has been acquired, to raise awareness and produce management recommendations (maximum frequency and volume of extraction, land use, ecosystem restoration, etc.) to make reasonable use of this underground resource without drastically changing its balance, for sustainable and integrated water management, necessary for greater resilience of atoll communities;

4. INVITES IUCN Members and environmental associations working in the countries concerned to fully appropriate these protocols, to promote them to the relevant stakeholders in the atolls, and to put in place the conditions necessary for their proper deployment, including through incentive measures and actions to restore native forest cover; and

5. URGES the international community to strengthen technical and financial cooperation for island states, to support them in implementing adaptive freshwater solutions, such as nature-based solutions, rainwater harvesting systems, and other approaches appropriate to their specific contexts.