To: Official National Coordinating Bodies for Liaison with the IOC (Member States)

Cc: Permanent Delegates/Observer Missions to UNESCO of IOC Member States
National Commissions for UNESCO in IOC Member States
The Chair and Vice-Chairs of the Commission
Officers of Major IOC Subsidiary Bodies (Scientific, Technical and Regional)

Subject: International Day for Biological Diversity and 20th Anniversary of the Ocean Biodiversity Information System (OBIS new name)

On 26 May 2000, the Census of Marine Life issued a press release to launch the Ocean Biogeographic Information System (OBIS) with a US$3.7 million grant from the U.S. National Oceanographic Partnership Program (NOPP) and the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation. This grant covered both overall system design as well as data collation for diverse species groups. The press release noted that “the ultimate vision of OBIS was that of an individual selecting any area or volume of water on a global map to bring up information on what has been reported to live there. OBIS would enable access by scientists and others to historical data on species distribution and abundance and provide a framework into which newly collected data can be placed”. OBIS is one of the major legacies of the 10-year international effort undertaken under the Census of Marine Life.

Since 2011, OBIS has continued its activities as a project of the IOC International Data and Information Exchange (IODE) programme, coordinated through a secretariat hosted at the IOC Project Office for IODE in Ostend, Belgium. The project is supported by a growing network of thousands of data providers connected by 31 national, regional and thematic OBIS nodes. Today, OBIS has nearly 60 million distribution records belonging to 127,000 species integrated from over 3,000 datasets stretching back to the 17th century. On average, OBIS is referred to in over 100 scientific papers annually. These studies track and predict the effects of climate change on biodiversity, reveal the dynamics and distribution of invasive species, and further enhance fundamental understanding of biodiversity, by providing baseline data for assessing the status of the ocean ecosystem’s health.

On 22 May, Member States and organizations will celebrate the UN International Day of Biological Diversity. This year marks also the 20th anniversary of OBIS. During the months leading to the end
of the year, IOC will communicate on the various achievements of OBIS. The celebration will culminate in a special session “OBIS celebrates 20 years – the power of integrated data” at the 5th World Conference on Marine Biodiversity (WCMB 2020), 13–16 December 2020 in Auckland, New Zealand.

Following the recommendation of the IODE Steering Group for OBIS, and the subsequent agreement by the IODE Management Group, I would like to announce a change in the name of OBIS: the Ocean Biogeographic Information System is renamed the Ocean Biodiversity Information System, keeping the same acronym OBIS. The new name does not imply a change in the core business of OBIS. It reflects the continuous key contribution of OBIS activities and products to the overall domain of biodiversity research and conservation. In addition, the new name of OBIS aligns closer with international conventions and processes that address marine biodiversity.

By inviting you to join in and celebrate the achievements of OBIS, I also urge Member States to increase support to OBIS in form of direct and in-kind contributions and by publishing marine biodiversity data from your marine biodiversity assessments and monitoring programmes through the Ocean Biodiversity Information System (OBIS).

Yours sincerely,

[signed]

Vladimir Ryabinin
Executive Secretary