Dr. Brundtland and distinguished guests:

My task is to explain how it came to pass that Dr. Gro Harlem Brundtland, Mr. Lawrence S. Huntington, and an institution called the Woods Hole Research Center (WHRC) are featured together in this program here tonight.

I had a freshly minted Ph.D. in forest science when the Brundtland Commission report came out in 1987, and the sustainability message of the report made intuitive sense to me. After all, foresters, at least the good ones, have been practicing what they call “sustainable yield” for decades or even centuries. The concept is straightforward -- the forester can measure the trees, map out the forest to be managed, and make a few calculations about rates of tree growth, which we might call “modeling” today, to calculate how much timber can be harvested periodically so that the wood removed from the forest does not exceed the rate at which the remaining trees are growing. Hence, a yield of useful wood products is sustained over the long term while maintaining a healthy forest. Most foresters recognize that they, personally, are unlikely to live long enough to see their management plans fully implemented, because the trees grow slowly relative to human life spans, but they rest assured that the next generation of foresters will continue to sustainably manage the forest according to plan and for the benefit of the original land owner’s descendants. This concept of inter-generational sharing of wealth from wise management of natural resources has been with us for a long time.
What was new and inspiring for me as a young scientist reading the Brundtland report, was that it also established the connection between human needs and the environment. It forced me to look beyond the trees and the forest to see the people. In the forward to the report, Dr. Brundtland wrote: “The environment does not exist as a sphere separate from human actions….The word ‘development’ has been narrowed by some into...what poor nations should do to become richer….But the ‘environment’ is where we all live; and ‘development’ is what we all do in attempting to improve our lot within that abode. The two are inseparable.”

I suspect that to Larry Huntington, this inseparability of environmental and human well-being is also intuitive. After all, managing financial investments to sustain monetary capital throughout a client’s lifetime, perhaps with something left over to pass down as an inheritance, is a central objective of his profession of fiduciary advising. It is therefore a natural extension to apply sustainability concepts of managing monetary capital to directing conservation and science organizations like ours and to support their missions to enlighten sustainable management of natural capital. I’ll never forget how Larry, as our former Board Chairman, characterized the mission of the WHRC: “Our job,” he summarized, “is to keep track of the number of cookies in Mother Nature’s cookie jar.” Whether it is assets in a fiduciary trust, trees in a forest, carbon atoms, water molecules, species of plants and animals, or cookies, you need good data and understanding to manage the balance sheet -- the inputs and the outputs -- to keep a positive balance of resources in the cookie jar.

I hope you had a chance to look at the many posters around the room this evening. They demonstrate how the scientists at the WHRC are keeping track of the natural capital in Mother Nature’s cookie jar by measuring, mapping, and modeling the Earth’s ecosystems. Emphasizing forests, water resources, soils and permafrost, we provide the compelling data and policy
analysis for how people are changing the balance of essential resources – land, water, biodiversity, and climate – needed for both healthy ecosystems and prosperous societies. We merge top notch original science of how the world works from a biological and physical perspective with how it works from an economic and social perspective. I also invite you to take a close look at the wooden plaque that is the physical Huntington prize on display tonight, along with the description of the Brazilian woodworkers’ cooperative, which is sustainably harvesting tropical hardwoods. This plaque is emblematic of our many projects involving the engagement of farmers, fishers, managers, technicians, scientists, and students in our research and outreach efforts in developing countries throughout the world.

Our work is sustainability science, inspired by the Brundtland Commission’s vision of sustainable development. Dr. Brundtland also wrote: “we appeal to citizens groups, to nongovernmental organizations, to educational institutions, and to the scientific community. They have all played indispensable roles in the creation of public awareness and political change in the past. They will play a crucial part in putting the world onto sustainable development paths...” The Woods Hole Research Center is answering that call.

The 1987 Brundtland report chronicled environmental challenges of that day. Most of us in this room are old enough to remember names like Bhopal and Chernobyl. There were severe droughts in Africa that decade and widespread fish poisonings in the Rhine River. Today we have the BP Gulf of Mexico oil well blowout, Fukushima, droughts on every continent, dead zones in estuaries throughout the world, and of course climate change, which only a few science visionaries of the 1980s, such as our own WHRC founder, Dr. George Woodwell, foresaw as the a planetary emergency that it now most certainly is. You know, we began planning this event
over a year ago, but Hurricane Sandy has since made our choice of New York City as the venue a poignant example of the inseparability of the environment and people.

We know so much more now about how we could manage these challenges, and progress has been made on many fronts; yet there is so much more for us to do to bring our science to bear, relentlessly, tirelessly, sometimes in the face of discouraging trends, to illuminate the pathways to sustainability. Our vision at the WHRC is a world in which the insights of science guide management of the Earth’s natural resources, so that we and future generations may sustain prosperous and fulfilling lives without degrading the ecosystems that support humanity and a diverse abundance of life.

My 19-year-old son voted for the first time a few months ago, but I sense that he, and others of his generation, like Dr. Brundtland’s granddaughter, Julie, who we are so pleased to have with us here tonight, still feel mostly unempowered to influence the trajectory of the world that our generations are leaving theirs. Perhaps it is not unreasonable or audacious of them to expect that a New York gathering of distinguished scientists, conservationists, business leaders, and policy makers would focus on why we are not yet doing what is needed to hand over to them a planet that can sustain ecosystems and people. That challenge is what gets me up in the morning to go to work; it is a value shared by all of our staff, from the facilities managers to the accountants, research assistants, and scientists; and it is what propels the many men and women who so generously give of their time, wisdom, and resources as members of our WHRC Board of Directors, and to whom I am so grateful for helping us organize this event tonight.

I am grateful to have this opportunity to honor Dr. Brundtland as a source of inspiration for our sustainability science and to honor Larry Huntington for putting into practice sustainability concepts for our institution and others. We invite all of you to join us as part of
our growing community, helping to seek paths to sustainability based on the firm footing of the very best environmental science.

And now it is my honor to introduce our host here at the New York Yacht Club; the conservationist for whom our prize is named, a mentor, a builder and leader of organizations, and as you can tell from our immediate environment, a sailor: Commodore Lawrence S. Huntington.