

A Commonwealth message at Westminster Abbey by Lewis Pugh
Commonwealth Day, 11 March 2019

On the edge of the ice

I am standing at the North Pole, on the edge of the ice. In front of me is a large open patch of sea. And the wind is bone-chilling.

I start stripping off my thermal gear, until I'm down to just my Speedo trunks. And what I remember most about that moment was that feeling of dread inside my stomach.

Then I hear the countdown: *"Three - two - ONE!"*

And as David, my coach, got to *"one"*, a thought came into my mind, and I just couldn't dive in. The thought was: if things go horribly wrong now, how long will it take for my frozen body to sink the 4 ½ kilometres to the bottom of the Arctic Ocean?

Which is probably not the best thought to have.

So, I turned to David and said, *'If I get into trouble, please don't let me swim the full kilometre, pull me out after 500 metres.'*

Competing goals

He grabbed me and said, *"Lewis, what are you doing!? If you dive into this water preparing to swim a kilometre, but also thinking about the possibility of getting out half way, you are preparing your mind for victory and defeat at the same time."*

He said to me, "You have seen the Arctic melt. Now is the time to carry your message. There is nothing more powerful than a made-up mind."

And so we stood on the edge of the ice, I said a short prayer, and I dived straight into the Arctic Ocean.

A race against time

Ladies and gentlemen, when it comes to protecting the environment, we have been diving in with thoughts of victory and defeat in our minds at the same time.

I've been swimming now for 32 years, and over that period of time I have seen our oceans change completely.



Three things have come together to create this perfect storm: climate change, over-fishing and plastic pollution.

The speed of the change is alarming. When I first swam in the Arctic, the water was 3° Centigrade. When I swam there recently it was 10° Centigrade. And that is right on the edge of the Arctic ice pack.

What we are now doing to our world will impact every person on this planet, it will impact every future generation, and it will impact the entire animal kingdom.

Let us also remember, when we damage our environment, we can create conflict: people fight over dwindling resources. So when we protect our environment, we foster peace.

Commonwealth of oceans

Therefore, it is right that on the 70th anniversary of the Commonwealth we ask ourselves the question: what can we do, together, to restore the health of our oceans and also to build peace?

Well I believe that the Commonwealth is uniquely placed to solve this crisis.

Almost every Commonwealth nation is a maritime nation. Many of us are island nations. We have a deep affinity with our oceans. And we also represent 1/3rd of the world's population.

More than sum of our parts

But the Commonwealth is so much more than the sum of its people. We are also home to some of the most incredible life on earth. The Commonwealth is the home of the polar bear. The Commonwealth is the home of the African penguin. The Commonwealth is the home of the humpback whale, the bluefin tuna, and the Great Barrier Reef.

Our common wealth is our ocean.

With our vast marine estate, we now have an opportunity to work together and to lead the world in ocean conservation.

This is why it was so important that, at last year's Commonwealth Summit, we acknowledged with the Blue Charter our responsibility to protect our oceans.

30 x 30 protection

But we must now take action, and keep up with the speed of the change. Scientists are urging us to fully protect at least 30% of our oceans by 2030. Currently we have protected less than 7 percent.



The young people with us here today did not cause this crisis. And yet it will completely shape their lives. It is our responsibility to ensure that their voices are heard, and acted upon.

Now is the time to build a new generation of Marine Protected Areas, and now is also the time to welcome in a new generation of marine protectors.

Our gift to the world

I would like to leave you with one final thought:

It is the moments which challenge us the most that define us.

We stand at a crucial moment in the history of our planet. So we must dive in together, and without reservation, in order to protect our oceans.

Let this be the Commonwealth's gift to the world.

Thank you.

Lewis Pugh is an endurance swimmer and the UN Patron of the Oceans. He grew up in three different Commonwealth countries.