



Communication and Marketing Department
Isebe loThungelwano neNtengiso
Kommunikasie en Bemerkingsdepartement

Private Bag X3, Rondebosch 7701, South Africa
Welgelegen House, Chapel Road Extension, Rosebank, Cape Town
Tel: +27 (0) 21 650 5427/5428/5674 Fax: +27 (0) 21 650 5628

www.uct.ac.za

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UCT alumnus urges Commonwealth leaders to protect at least a third of the world's oceans

University of Cape Town (UCT) alumnus Lewis Pugh has urged Commonwealth leaders to fully protect at least 30% of the world's oceans by 2030. Currently, less than 7% is protected.

According to Pugh, this is in recognition that that our common wealth is our oceans – with the vast marine estate, there is an opportunity to work together to lead the world in ocean conservation.

Pugh, who is also the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) Patron of the Oceans, was invited by Queen Elizabeth II to speak about protecting the world's oceans at the annual Commonwealth Day Service at Westminster Abbey. The event was attended by members of the British royal family and United Kingdom Prime Minister Theresa May, along with high commissioners from across the Commonwealth and other dignitaries.

The Commonwealth, representing one-third of the world's population and with a deep affinity with its seas, is uniquely placed to restore the health of the world's oceans, said Pugh who is also an endurance swimmer.

Pugh pointed out that almost every Commonwealth nation is a maritime one, many of them island nations, and all have a deep affinity with our oceans.

But having been an endurance swimmer for 32 years, he has seen the oceans change completely over that time. "Three things have come together to create this perfect storm: climate change, overfishing and plastic pollution." He called the speed of change "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."

He warned that what the world does now will impact every person on the planet as well as the entire animal kingdom. It will also impact future generations.

Likening the world's attitude to protecting the environment to his own when he attempted his one-kilometre swim at the North Pole, he said "we have been diving in with thoughts of victory and defeat in our minds at the same time."

Pugh raised another red flag too, saying that when the environment is damaged, the situation results in conflict, with people fighting over dwindling resources.

"So, when we protect our environment, we foster peace."

Turning to the young people present at the service, Pugh said they did not cause the crisis, yet it will completely shape their lives.

He said: "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."

In her Commonwealth Day message, the Queen said the 2019 event has special significance as it marks the 70th anniversary of the London Declaration, when nations of the Commonwealth "agreed to move forward together as free and equal members."

"The vision and sense of connection that inspired the signatories has stood the test of time, and the Commonwealth continues to grow, adapting to address contemporary needs," she said.

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Lewis Pugh

PIC: Kelvin Trautman

ENDS

Issued by: UCT Communication and Marketing Department

Angelique Botha

Media Liaison and Monitoring Assistant
Communication and Marketing Department
University of Cape Town
Rondebosch
Tel: +27 (21) 650 2583
Cell: +27 (64) 276 6234
Email: angelique.botha@uct.ac.za
Website: www.uct.ac.za