

## **Address to the Commonwealth Westminster Abbey**

11 March 2019

### **On the edge of the ice**

I am standing at the North Pole, looking out over the ice. In front of me is a large open patch of sea. And the water is completely black.

There is a bone-chilling wind. I start stripping off my thermal gear, until I am down to just my Speedo swimming trunks. And what I remember most about that moment, was my bare feet freezing on the ice, and that dread inside my stomach.

And then I hear the countdown: *“Three – two – ONE!”*

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

And so I turned to him and I said: *‘David, if I get into trouble, please don’t let me swim the full kilometre, pull me out after 500 metres.’*

### **Competing goals**

He pulled me away from the edge of the ice and said: *“Lewis, do you know what you are doing now? If you dive into this water preparing to swim a kilometre, but also thinking about the possibility of getting out after just 500 metres, you're 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 walked back to the edge of the ice, I said a short prayer, and I dived straight into the Arctic Ocean.

### **A race against time**

Friends, 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 have 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 a perfect storm – climate change, over-fishing and plastic pollution.

And it's the speed of the change which is so alarming. When I first swam on the edge of the Arctic ice pack, the water was 3° Centigrade. On my most recent swim it was 10° Centigrade.

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

And let's also remember, when we damage our environment, we can also create conflict: people fight over dwindling resources. So when we protect our environment, we foster peace.

### **Commonwealth of oceans**

And 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 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 can work together to lead the world in ocean conservation.

This is why it was so important that at last year's Commonwealth Heads of Government meeting here in London we acknowledged our collective responsibility to protect our oceans for future generations.

### **30 x 30 protection**

But we must now keep up with the speed of the change. Scientists are urging us to fully protect at least 30% of our oceans by 2030. At the moment 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's our responsibility to ensure that their voices are heard, and acted upon.

So now not only do we need to build a new generation of Marine Protected Areas; we must also welcome a new generation of marine protectors.

**Our gift to the world**

I would like to leave you with this final thought:

It's the moments which challenge us the most that define us. We now stand at a defining moment in the history of our planet.

Let us dive in together, without reservation, to protect our oceans.

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

Thank you.

Lewis Pugh, OIG  
United Nations Patron of the Oceans