



Less talk and more action: the Commonwealth Blue Charter moves into high gear

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Many of the countries worst affected by climate change belong to the Commonwealth. **Jeff Ardron**, project lead on the Commonwealth Blue Charter, told *The Marine Biologist* why the time is right to translate words into practical solutions.

How did the Blue Charter come into being?

At the first UN Ocean Conference in June 2017, the Commonwealth Secretary-General asked a number of delegates from Commonwealth countries if the ocean was a priority for them, and whether the secretariat should become more engaged. The resounding response was 'yes!', and I was tasked to organise something that could bring together the Commonwealth members. The germ of what was to become the Commonwealth Blue Charter was to cooperatively address the problems that are facing the global ocean; problems that no single country can tackle alone. The Charter of the Commonwealth added a number of principles to the mix, emphasising human rights, equity, transparency, sustainability, and rule of law.

After nine months of consultations and (sometimes hectic) revisions with our member countries, we had a statement ready for consideration by

the 53 Heads of Government. One sunny day in April, at the Commonwealth Heads Of Government Meeting (CHOGM) in London, not only did they sign but they loudly applauded. The positive spirit present in the room from the highest levels of the government was really palpable.

Why do you think Oceans have risen so much on the international agenda in the past year or two?

For the past 10 or 20 years, we as scientists and policy makers have been saying that the ocean is this fantastic but largely ignored resource: a giant generator of oxygen, life, and of food and security for coastal communities. But, I think most people just took it for granted. Then, as pressures and stresses increased, and the ocean's health began to seriously decline, it became harder to ignore. Suddenly everyone has started to take notice. In Britain the Blue Planet II series has had a huge effect. Everywhere, there's been the equivalent of a Blue Planet moment, when advocates and the public are saying to their governments, 'Hey, wait, you've got to pay attention to this!'

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How are marine biologists engaging with the Blue Charter?

A country steps forward to lead on an issue that's important to them, we create an action group around that topic, and then other Commonwealth countries and partners are invited to join. As I mentioned, the Blue Charter was officially launched in April. Right now, we are in the middle of this process, wherein countries are being invited to join the action groups. Then, we will invite the NGOs, including any scientific organizations that are interested. To date, eleven countries have stepped forward

to lead on eight topics: aquaculture; blue economy; coral reef restoration; mangrove restoration; marine plastics; ocean acidification; ocean and climate change; and ocean observation, all of which have a science component.

The action groups are meant to be filling the gap between what people are doing on the ground, for example the scientists who are actively out there restoring corals, with the high-level commitments—the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and so forth. The past decade has

created a massive amount of high-level policy; there are over 200 different rules, declarations and commitments that Commonwealth countries have signed up to. The SDGs alone have several hundred indicators. So, there are all these targets at the highest levels, and we have community groups at home, picking up rubbish on the beaches, scientists regenerating coral from tiny fragments, thinking about seagrass disease and so forth, but there is very little connecting these two worlds. This is where the action groups come in, consulting the expertise of the people on the ground, finding out what works and what doesn't, so they can provide realistic recommendations and project proposals to their governments.

The Blue Charter 'could turn around the decline in ocean health'. That is a big statement. What is it about this initiative that makes people think it could be the turning point?

The Commonwealth Blue Charter is designed to be action-orientated and country-led; in other words, it's not a

enthusiastic country is the one that sets the tone. We have not taken that approach here. You will note that in the Blue Charter, climate change and the Paris targets are mentioned, but there is no commitment to ending climate change, neither are

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there any new commitments around plastic or fisheries or any of those very important and relevant topics. Rather, we highlight the importance of existing commitments and issues, and mandate the creation of action groups to deal with them. The action group approach is very different because the countries that step forward are the countries that care and are engaged. Thus, the front-runners are the ones setting the pace, developing the good practices, and coming back to the other countries with recommendations.

As a driver for change, are there any comparisons to be made with SDG 14?¹

We all need each other. SDG 14 is fantastic. Peter Thompson, UN special envoy for the ocean, was one of the main architects behind SDG 14, and later organized the UN Oceans Conference. He has also been a stalwart sup-

porter and an ambassador for the Blue Charter. In other words, there has been cooperation, not competition, between the UN and the Commonwealth. The SDGs are very important throughout Commonwealth membership; you'd be surprised how many governments in Commonwealth countries that we visit have reorganized their work streams and the policies around meeting SDG targets. What the SDGs do not provide, however, is the 'how to', and that's where the Blue charter steps in, exchanging good practices among countries and seeing what works.

To what extent is this about the Commonwealth finding a role and purpose?

The Commonwealth Secretariat thinks ocean issues are important, and the Commonwealth countries also think that the oceans are important. If that makes the Commonwealth relevant then that's great, but that's not why we're doing it. The Commonwealth is a bit of an unsung, sometimes maligned, hero. Sure, any international organization is a difficult beast to coordinate, and can always be improved. But the Commonwealth has particular advantages too: we share a language (in most Commonwealth countries English is spoken), and a similar judicial system, making it easier to translate legislation passed in one country into the legislation of another. From its colonial beginnings, the Commonwealth has had to evolve several times, and I think we are now in what you might call the 'post-post-colonial' era. We find that the smaller countries are setting the pace on the Blue Charter.

Jeff Ardron (j.ardron@commonwealth.int) began his career in a fishing village on the west coast of Canada. Seeing declining catches convinced him to go back to university and do something about the situation. He has co-founded two environmental NGOs, and has been involved on the boards of numerous others. He has worked at national and international levels, within and outside of governments, in Canada, Germany, the USA, and currently the UK. Jeff is now project lead on the Commonwealth Blue Charter for the Commonwealth Secretariat.



Mukhisa Kituyi, Secretary-General of UNCTAD (United Nations Conference on Trade and Development); Peter Thomson, United Nations Oceans Envoy; and the Rt Hon Patricia Scotland, Commonwealth Secretary-General, at the second United Nations Ocean Forum in Geneva, July 2018. Image © Commonwealth Secretariat.

traditional international multilateral environment agreement (MEA), involving painstaking word-by-word negotiations, that has to be passed by painful consensus wherein the least

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¹ Sustainable Development Goal 14: Conserve and sustainably use the oceans, seas and marine resources for sustainable development