



THE LONG SWIM

Ella Foote joins Lewis Pugh, United Nations Patron of the Oceans, on a leg of his 350-mile swim of the length of the English Channel



Many set their sights on the English Channel, it is a popular challenge for long-distance swimmers, crossing from England to France. Some even swim to France and back again; however, no one has ever swum the entire length of the Channel, until now.

This summer, renowned endurance swimmer and United Nations Patron of the Oceans, Lewis Pugh set out to swim from Cornwall to Dover. The Long Swim, around 350 miles (560km), should take around 50 days and I was lucky enough to join Lewis around the half-way point on Day 27.

Lewis Pugh swims to raise awareness about the vulnerability of our oceans and is the only person to have completed a long-distance swim in every ocean of the world. Last year he swam one kilometre along the Arctic ice edge to raise the issue of

disappearing sea ice and climate change. This summer's swim has a political angle too, undertaking the challenge so that he can call on the British government, and all the governments of the world, to strengthen our ocean protection.

PLASTIC POLLUTION

I joined The Long Swim at Portland Marina in Dorset.

The plan was to finish at Lulworth Cove later that evening, where the crew and boat would anchor. I drove to Lulworth, left my car there and grabbed a taxi to Portland. As I drove into Lulworth I could see the Isle of Portland in the distance, it was a beautiful morning but the weather was on the turn. The day before, Lewis had been joined by a pod of dolphins and I was excited by the day ahead. I had no idea what to expect. I have joined a couple of support boat crews for Channel crossings and so was prepared for the discomfort

and unpredictability of a day out at sea.

Portland Marina was a hive of activity. Sky News, who were following the swim with a daily blog, had a team at the water. Lewis had gone out to swim that morning and his crew were preparing the boat for the day ahead. Sky did several live TV slots across the morning, while I was introduced to Major General Tim Toyne Sewell, his wife Jenny, Cheong-Ann Png and Sal Loxley. Tim had been expedition leader on many of Lewis's previous swims, while Cheong and Sal swam in a Channel relay crossing 20 years ago with Lewis. Tim had joined Lewis in the water the day before, swallow

diving into the water from the highest point of the boat and Sal was to join Lewis in the water that day with me.

I had only met Lewis over a Skype call earlier this year, so it was a joy to finally meet the man in person. I was treated by him and his crew like an old friend and certainly a friend of the ocean. Throughout

The Long Swim Lewis has campaigned hard at every opportunity and today was no different. Each media interview was designed to stress the importance of Lewis's swim. This wasn't just a feat of endurance, this was a swim to deliver a message and bring about change. "I've been swimming in our oceans for over 30 years, and the changes I've seen have been horrifying," says Lewis. "This swim will mark the beginning of a worldwide campaign to ensure that 30% of our oceans are fully protected by 2030. In addition, we need to change the tide on plastic pollution by stopping the amount of plastic pouring into our oceans – and roll up our sleeves to help remove the junk that's already there. Changing the world's oceans for the better starts with us, and it starts at home."

PROTECTING OUR OCEANS

Lewis was born in Plymouth, which is why his message is anchored in taking action at home first. "On paper, the UK is doing quite well towards meeting its commitment to protect 10% of its waters by 2020," says Lewis. "But when you unpack the numbers, they tell a

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Our writer Ella,
gets to swim
alongside Lewis!



← very different story. The sad truth is that of the 750,000 square kilometres of seas around the UK, only seven square kilometres are fully protected.” Lewis swims according to Channel swimming rules (in just swimming trunks, cap and goggles) and like a Channel crossing, when he is in the water he cannot touch the boat until he has swum the day’s distance. The daily aim is between 10 and 20 kilometres depending on the conditions. “The reason I don’t swim in a wetsuit, whether it’s in the Antarctic or the English Channel, is I’m delivering a message about the vulnerability of our seas,” says Lewis. “If I’m going to urge politicians to take the hard decisions and be courageous, I have to be courageous too. I am urging them to be courageous now, by getting serious about ocean protection.”

The swim, the equivalent of 16 Channel crossings, had so far seen Lewis encounter jellyfish stings, strong

currents and cold water. Due to the configuration of the UK coastline, he hasn’t always hugged the coast, swimming across larger bays like Lyme, when possible. There had been days of little progress and days where the conditions and currents were behind the team. Day 27 turned out to be one of those days. I was welcomed on board Aquila, an Open 46 Catamaran and thoughts of a long, potentially uncomfortable day were soon put behind me. The yacht was a beauty. Skippers Rowan Fernando and Stephen Praetorius guided us out of the harbour with ease and soon we were sailing out towards the GPS point where Lewis had last finished. Despite the high mood of reaching the half-way point, there was concern for Lewis’s shoulder which was starting to cause discomfort. The small crew, despite all having specific roles, quickly pulled together to get the boat moving and feed Lewis before him resting. It was



an ‘all hands on deck situation’ and I watched the team dance around each other like a well-rehearsed ballet. Sal and I, new to the team for the day, took to the bow to give the team the space they needed. Sal had flown over from Haiti to support and swim with Lewis, and it was a pleasure to lend him an Outdoor Swimmer cap for his swim. He told me tales of his friendship with Lewis and we talked about swimming, life and Haiti.

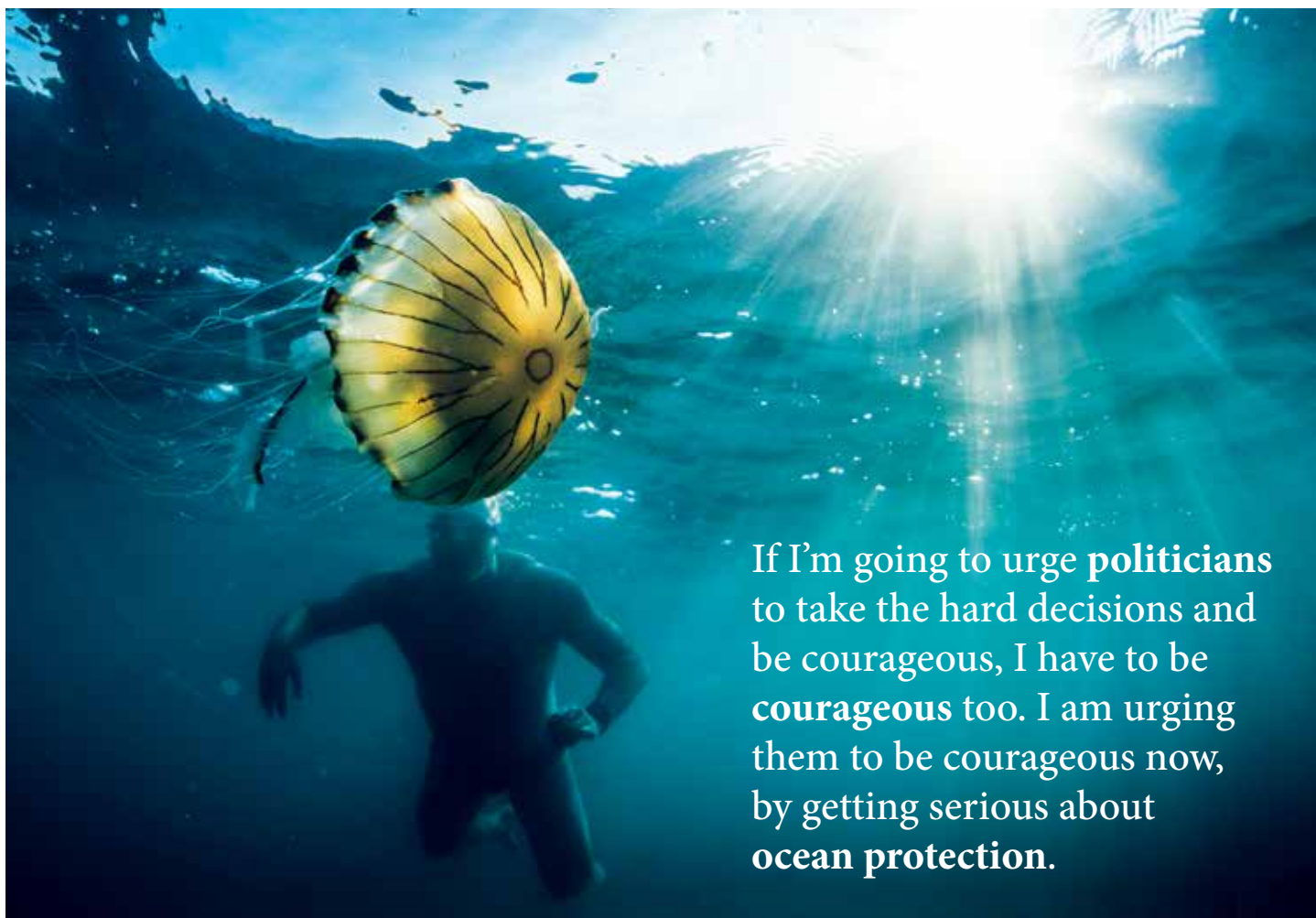
PUSHING THE PACE

I kept my eyes on the water, eagerly looking for sea life and watching the familiar curve of the Dorset coastline as we neared the spot to swim. Lewis prepared himself with a routine of Vaseline and discussions with Stephen while I watched in awe as he sprang into the water. Sal joined Lewis once he had set the pace, which was quick. After 30 minutes Lewis had already swum over three kilometres, the currents were in his favour giving him the push he needed. I watched as he stroked the water, barely making a splash. I guess after already swimming 174 miles of the Channel and all the oceans in the world, his body is used to the rhythm of the sea. It was smooth, mesmerising and fast – there was no chance I would keep up. The crew asked when I would like to jump in and I suddenly felt incredibly worried about swimming alongside. Lewis is the priority of the crew and I had fears of being left behind very quickly or hampering the day’s efforts. I decided to leave it until the final push, I would have more chance of staying close to a tired Lewis.

I jumped in about 20 minutes before the swim slowed and finished. Worries of keeping up were well founded, Stephen had asked that I kept an eye on

Lewis and support





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him for instructions as if I was pulling the pace down I would need to re-join the boat. Lewis slowed his pace so we could swim together for a while and I felt special to be able to mirror his arms. My stroke wasn't nearly as clean and the adrenaline and excitement meant I was all over the place, but for a short time I fell in sync with Lewis before he pushed forward again and I was signalled to take hold of the boat. Sal was still ploughing along, managing to keep up with the pace. I hung out in the turquoise clear water watching Lewis at eye level and feeling the strength and speed of Aquila pull on my arms. I didn't see a single fish or any sea life. Lewis swam 13 kilometres in under two hours that day, everyone was on a high.

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MARINE PROTECTED AREAS

Once Lewis was out of the water, we chatted about the swim and its purpose. I asked what he thought about each day and how he got in day after day, swim after swim. "Apart from what

I am going to eat when I get out?" he said. "I think about our seas and oceans. They have an amazing ability to restore themselves, if they are given the space and the time to do it. This means more effective Marine Protected Areas (MPAs)." MPAs give oceans a chance to recover and provide healthy, full and diverse safe havens for wildlife. This in turn gives them a chance to adapt to the huge environmental changes that are already underway. "If the British government raised the level of protection in our

existing MPAs, as well as creating some additional strategic areas, our oceans would be able to recover."

It was a fair ride back to Lulworth Cove and we were heading into the wind, so our progress was slow. I was well looked after with a delicious hot meal on board before we anchored in the bay. I sat on the top deck for most of the trip back and reflected on the day, Lewis's swim so far and how much further he had to go. The biggest

message I had taken from him was that it isn't just the government's responsibility, it is all of our responsibility to look after our natural world. We make decisions every day that have an impact on the world we live in, by paying attention and each doing something small perhaps we could have a bigger, better effect on the planet 🌍



Lewis is the UN Patron of the Oceans