

Lewis Pugh swaps Speedo for academic gown at UCT

Lewis Pugh, renowned for his endurance swims in icy seas to promote marine conservation, has accepted the position of Adjunct Professor in International Law at University of Cape Town.



Lewis Pugh

The quest for ocean protection is about getting nations to agree to put their different agendas aside and cooperate for the greater good. For Lewis, this quest might start with high-profile swims but it quickly transfers to convincing government officials at the highest level to sign enforceable international agreements.

“I was always pulled by the world's waters. As a young boy, I was fascinated by naval exploration and, as a young man I was drawn to swim in some of the world's most challenging seas. However, if I had not put my head down and studied law, I would not have been able to do what I do for the oceans,” explain Pugh..

“Law taught me how to argue passionately and rationally – a balance that is key to being an environmental campaigner. I look forward to sharing my experiences in the field with students and colleagues at UCT's Law Department, the place where my legal education began.”

“The art of negotiating at international level is about cultivating respect, being open to points of view that are different from your own. Education in South Africa has never been so vibrant and so urgent. Today's world presents significant challenges – poverty, environmental degradation, racism, gender inequality, lack of education and illiteracy, terrorism, disease, hunger, climate change ... I am excited to be part of this nexus where law, politics, and the environment intersect so dynamically, to help the next generation of lawyers and campaigners take on these issues.”

The Dean of Law, Professor Penelope Andrews says having Pugh as part of the faculty is a valuable asset “Having a graduate like Pugh makes us proud at UCT Law Faculty. Now that he is joining us as an Adjunct Professor, the staff and students will have the opportunity to engage with him on a regular basis. We will all benefit from his experience and commitment to our planet and all who inhabit it.”

In 2007, he undertook a long distance swim across an open patch of sea at the North Pole, equipped just in a Speedo swimming costume, to highlight the melting of the Arctic sea ice. He followed this up with a swim across a glacial lake on Mt Everest in 2010 to draw attention to the melting glaciers in the Himalayas.

In 2016, he helped negotiate the creation of the largest protected area in the world in the Ross Sea off Antarctica. The negotiations required consensus among 24 countries, a number of which had long-standing disputes with one another. The media dubbed his efforts, shuttling between the nations to secure the agreement, as "Speedo diplomacy". The Ross Sea Marine Protected Area is 1.5 million square kilometres - approximately the size of South Africa and Zimbabwe combined.

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