



ROYAL COMMONWEALTH SOCIETY



THE QUEEN'S COMMONWEALTH ESSAY COMPETITION 2020

Voices from the Blue World

by Aditya Choudhury, Senior Winner, aged 14 from Singapore

On behalf of the Grouper Community, I have the privilege of extending a warm welcome to my extended marine family at the *Commonwealth Ocean Conference* and I am honoured to deliver the keynote address. Before I begin my speech, I wish to convey our sincere condolences to the Sea Turtle Community for the tragic loss of their head, who had delivered last year's keynote address. His shocking death after being caught in a piece of fishing line has caused great grief and outrage across the currents.

I am aware that many communities are questioning the validity of this conference that relies on co-operation and co-existence. We can't ignore the anger and frustration of those who are suffering more than others owing to man-made pollution – discarded plastics, abandoned fishing equipment, chemical waste, residential waste, discharge of pesticides – which have devastating consequences for our Blue World. The Reef Shark Community has proposed violent retaliation against the Human Community, and they are being supported by the Union of Lionfish, Sea Snakes, Stingrays, Cone Snails, Flower Urchins, the Great Barracuda, Blue ringed Octopus, Great White Shark, Saltwater Crocodile and Box Jellyfish communities. The Union boasts an ever-growing list of supporting communities that fear the fate of the Coral Community, more than 50% of whom have suffered irreversible damage owing to rising acidity levels, pollution, over-fishing, coral mining and poor tourism practices.

We are aware that anthropogenic noise has increased unbearably with shipping, drilling, seismic testing, dynamite explosion, air gun surveys drowning out the gentle song of the sea creatures. To the Coral Community we wish to say that we can hear your cries of grief as baby corals in their first days of life lose their way home, the harsh noises masking the guiding sounds of animals on the reef. We can hear the cries of female whales who no longer hear the mating calls of other male whales and who sadly lose their right to have a family of their own.

To the Union, we wish to say that we must not make the same mistake as the Human Community by assuming that our Blue World is not connected to the Green World of Land Communities. While anger and violence seem to offer a temporary salve to our wounds, it cannot be a path to a thriving marine world. We are therefore delighted to share with you the reports brought by diverse communities about the efforts primarily spearheaded by the Commonwealth Blue Charter and supported by many organisations of the Green World.

We welcome the news brought by Reef communities about the Coral members growing in numbers in coral farms and nurseries who are re-planted on existing reefs. The same hands that cruelly hunt, kill and ravage our world can lovingly care for our most vulnerable members who are returning with greater resilience to changes in the Blue World. We know that the Union believes that the Land Community must pay the price of the destruction we witness and that they cannot be trusted as the number of active Blue World supporters is negligible.

In response we can only say that the Human community is already paying a high price with a currently raging pandemic in their midst. They too are terrified of the damage to the oceans. 250 million people in small island states and developing countries are directly dependent on coral reefs for food and income. During the 2004 tsunami the island nation of Maldives was spared the massive death toll suffered by other nations owing to its coral reefs. Many other low-lying communities at risk from coastal flooding also value the protection offered by coral reefs. My friends, don't you realise that they must join hands to protect their own interests as well? In fact, Maldives re-joined the Commonwealth this year, was welcomed by the Commonwealth Secretary General Patricia Scotland and now all 54 member countries are committed to the Commonwealth Blue Charter. They believe, in the words of the Secretary General, 'it is only by working together across sectors and engaging at all levels, that we can mobilize in effective ways to drive lasting global change for our ocean.' We are happy to report that we are already witnessing the heartening effects of the champion countries and their partners working in key areas that include Sustainable Aquaculture (led by Cyprus), Sustainable Blue Economy (Kenya), Coral Reef Protection and Restoration (Australia, Belize, Mauritius), Mangrove Restoration (Sri Lanka), Ocean Acidification (New Zealand), Ocean and Climate Change (Fiji), Ocean Observations (Canada), Marine Plastic Pollution (United Kingdom, Vanuatu) and Marine Protected Areas (Seychelles).

For those of you who have no faith in the promises made by leaders, who have seen human greed for profit that exerts a choke hold far stronger than the tentacles of our Octopus Community, we have more news. The flower crabs of Singapore spoke of the astonishing sight witnessed by one of them when he was trapped in a pool at low tide and fearfully buried in the sand. Seeing a number of approaching humans, he was ready to fiercely use his pincers before becoming an item on their chilli crab menu. However, he was flabbergasted to see them cleaning the beach of the dreaded plastic that looks like empty shells and has trapped and killed so many of them, particularly hermit crabs in search of new shells. There is a growing movement along the shores of countless nations that bode well for all of us.

A Royal Blue Tang representative happily reported that human tourists are appreciating that corals are already a gift and must not be given as presents. It has also been noted that anchors are not being dropped near coral reefs. They refrain from feeding wildlife that used to disrupt our normal feeding cycles. Even younger humans do not attempt to touch, handle or ride us and know that it is illegal to touch some of us.

We also have with us a Sri Lankan Mangrove Clam representative who shared the positive impacts of this Commonwealth member state's pioneering work as the world's first country to protect the entirety of its mangrove forests. Villages that have intact mangroves suffered significantly less damage than others during the 2004 tsunami! So, you see, they don't need to do anything to save us! Everything they do to save themselves from the swallowing wall of water of a tsunami, from declining fish catch yields or the loss of livelihoods, will in turn save us! Healthy fish populations have provided livelihoods and nutrition to millions of small-scale fishermen and their families for generations. Coastal communities will be able to sustain themselves by following the model set by this Commonwealth member state.

Across our streams and currents the news of positive change is bringing hope and cheer! Earlier we used to be troubled by humans chasing or harassing some of us, trapping us between their monstrous vessels and the shore or coming between mother and young. Such instances are no longer as common as before. It is true that humans have lost their instinctual knowledge transmitted across generations and are sadly reliant on acquired knowledge. Our instincts have ensured our survival over ages. However, man's scientific or rational knowledge clouds his instinctual knowledge and makes him reliant on tools and technologies as well as rules and law. As their instinct for survival has been dulled and their appetite for exploiting their finite resources seems insatiable, their Clean Oceans Alliances and Blue Charter will pave the way in ensuring a fair, equitable, inclusive and sustainable approach to ocean economic development and protection. Human beings have lost the ability to naturally live in harmony with us and only governments have the mandate to make laws and policies that will protect us all. We are confident the private sector will support these initiatives with the necessary expertise and personnel to secure their economic interests. Civil society at large will also be ready to co-operate with the increasing awareness about their vital reliance on the ocean and its role in economic and social development.

The Green World of Land Communities is habitable for humankind because of the world's oceans – their rainwater, drinking water, weather, climate, coastlines, food and even the oxygen they breathe are all provided by our Blue World. Therefore, we must rely on their ability to justify their name 'homo sapiens' (wise man) as they work together to preserve our common Book of Life, and one day we will together read a new chapter of the Blue and Green world as brothers who ride the earth together – a brilliant jewel in space, radiant with our love for our cherished home!