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Perspective | The Commonwealth Blue Charter: From zero to fifty-three in less than a year

By Jeff Ardron

Editor's note: The Commonwealth – formerly the Commonwealth of Nations – comprises 53 countries, 46 of which have a marine coastline. Altogether, Commonwealth countries contain about one-third of all marine waters in national jurisdiction. As a result, any coordinated effort on sustainable management holds the potential to effect significant change for the world ocean.

In April 2018, leaders of the Commonwealth countries agreed to the Commonwealth Blue Charter – a coordinated push to protect the ocean from the effects of climate change, pollution, and overfishing. Among its priority areas of action is the protection and restoration of coral reefs, an action that will be led by Australia, Belize, and Mauritius.

Jeff Ardron is an Adviser on Ocean Governance with the Commonwealth Secretariat, and leads the Commonwealth Blue Charter project. Here he provides his insights from inside the process to secure the agreement. The views expressed here are his, and do not necessarily reflect those of the Commonwealth Secretariat or its member countries.

One unseasonably warm April afternoon this year in London, I sat in a packed media center watching five foreign ministers from Commonwealth countries explain why their governments were going to become 'Commonwealth Blue Charter Champions.' It was a pinch-me moment. One full day before fifty-three Commonwealth Heads of Government were due to adopt the Commonwealth Blue Charter, and already ministers were stepping forward to lead on it!

A short year ago, the 'Blue Charter' was just a catchy name, meant to represent the Commonwealth's deepening engagement in ocean issues. Our Secretary-General liked it, and so we took the still rather open-ended notion to the United Nations in June 2017. There, at a side event to The Ocean Conference, member countries were enthusiastic about cooperatively tackling ocean-related issues.

But there were some caveats. Foremost, the smaller coastal and island states felt like they were drowning in a sea of commitments – at global, regional, and national levels. (The [UN Sustainable Development Goals](#) alone come with 169 targets and 230 indicators.) What they needed, they made clear to us, was not more of the same. Rather, there was a vast gap that needed to be bridged between high-level government commitments and national and local actions.

Bridging the gap between commitments and actions

In the ensuing months, I traveled to various meetings and forums and heard similar messages, expressed in a variety of ways. People were universally keen and concerned about the ocean, but equally worried about how these issues could be addressed.

Thus, from the beginning, early drafts of the Commonwealth Blue Charter highlighted existing commitments, but did not make new ones. Rather, it focused on the creation of (what became known as) 'Action Groups' to cooperatively tackle them. In policy wonk-speak, it was to be an 'implementation vehicle' for these many commitments, particularly [SDG 14 \(Life Below Water\)](#).

So far, so good. Then, towards the end of 2017, as the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting (CHOGM) in April 2018 loomed on the horizon, a couple of developed countries began pushing for new commitments on their particular topics of interest. But the many developing countries, especially the small island states, remained adamant. They didn't want more commitments; they wanted actions.

This was the darkest hour. Friends and colleagues began gently to question us: why were we not in favor of making a commitment on the [x, y, z] ocean crisis? At times, I questioned myself. But each time we went through the rationale, we arrived back at the same conclusions: 1) The list of issues facing the ocean is pretty much endless – much broader than what was being proposed; 2) Prioritizing them amongst 53 countries would take months, if not years; and 3) Getting consensus on language might well not happen before the April CHOGM meeting; and if such language were found, the lowest common denominator would inevitably dominate.

A bottom-up, country-driven approach

Thus, the Commonwealth Blue Charter prevailed as a cooperative, principled approach to addressing existing ocean issues. The principles contained in the [Charter of the Commonwealth](#) would provide the bedrock for all decision-making, and the countries stepping forward as Champions would identify issues that would be addressed. The bottom-up, country-driven approach was both pragmatic and morally the right thing to do, but also potentially risky: would any countries step forward? In February 2018, with just two months to go before CHOGM, we set ourselves a target of finding five countries willing to (co-)lead on topics that were critical to them. Bearing in mind, all this was premised on the Commonwealth Blue Charter being adopted, which was not guaranteed either.

We need not have worried. Without prompting, countries began to approach us. Sometimes two or more would highlight the same issue, and we put them in contact with one another. The pieces began to fall rapidly into place.

Soon, after a blur of meetings, webinars, correspondence and urgent phone calls, I found myself one unseasonably warm late afternoon in a press tent, watching five foreign ministers from Commonwealth countries....

"My work is done," I joked to a colleague next to me. In actual fact, the work has just begun.

To date, eleven countries have stepped forward to lead on eight different topic areas relevant to sustainable ocean development and conservation (table below). While the details, and indeed the membership, of these Action Groups are still being sorted out, it is nonetheless an auspicious beginning. If the past year is any indication, the one ahead will be very full indeed. Keep an eye out on [the website](#) and #BlueCharter to see how it all unfolds.

For more information:

Jeff Ardron. Email: j.ardron@commonwealth.int

Table: Action Groups and Champions

1. Aquaculture

Champion: Cyprus

2. Blue economy

Champion: Kenya

3. Coral reef restoration

Champions: Australia, Belize, Mauritius

4. Mangrove restoration

Champion: Sri Lanka

5. Marine plastics (aka 'Commonwealth Clean Oceans Alliance')

Champions: UK, Vanuatu

6. Ocean acidification

Champion: New Zealand

7. Ocean and climate change

Champion: Fiji

8. Ocean observations

Champion: Canada

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