Endurance swimmer Lewis Pugh takes the plunge to save threatened Lake Baikal

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Endurance swimmer and UN Environment Patron of the Oceans, Lewis Pugh, and the Russian Federation are joining forces to protect Lake Baikal, the oldest and deepest lake in the world, and home to species found nowhere else on earth.

"Lake Baikal is suffering from industrial pollution and is one of the areas on the globe experiencing the most rapid climate change,"Â Lewis told media on the shore of the lake before commencing an awareness-raising swim on the annual Lake Baikal Day.Â "We must redouble our efforts to protect it."Â The lake, situated in Russia, is a World Heritage Site and requires a global commitment for its protection. Erik Solheim, UN Environment Chief said,Â "This lake has existed for 25 million years. We cannot let a few decades of increasing human activity damage such a reservoir of life and biodiversity. We must protect its unique natural heritage today."Â Industrial pollution is of particular concern for Lake Baikal. The Baikal region contains an industrial corridor with chemical plants and aging industries. These lie close to the lake and, as a result of prevailing winds, transport industrial pollutants into its basin, affecting the lake's entire ecosystem. Furthermore, in the past two decades, the tourism industry has developed rapidly on its coast, having a direct impact on its preservation. This is especially true for the endemic Baikal Seal (Pusa sibirica) - the world's only exclusively freshwater seal - whose reducing population of 60,000 is already under pressure from pollution and hunting.Â "Environmental threats know no geographical boundaries,"Â Lewis said.Â "It is especially important for Russia, China and Mongolia to work together to find a solution to the proposed dam being built in Mongolia in a tributary, which feeds the lake. Lake Baikal is a World Heritage Site, and so its protection is a responsibility of all nations. But that's just one threat the lake is facing. Others come from industry, tourism or illegal activities and we must do everything we can to minimize their impact on the lake."

The Russian Federation has designated 2017 as the Year of Ecology, and last month Mr Sergey Ivanov, President Putin's former Chief of Staff, was appointed as the President's Special Representative for Environmental Protection, Ecology and Transport. Mr Ivanov has already mentioned that saving Lake Baikal is close to his heart and is an absolute urgency.Â "Lake Baikal hosts one fifth of the entire planet's freshwater and contains over 1,300 endemic species. The lake is very precious to Russia, and to the world", he said.Â "Protecting Lake Baikal will be central to our Year of Ecology we have already earmarked 343 activities that we will be undertaking from cleaning up industrial waste in the Arctic to protecting endangered tigers and looking after Russian's vast forests which serves as an important carbon sink,"Â he added.

Lewis Pugh is a maritime lawyer and an endurance swimmer. He is the only person to have completed a long distance swim in every ocean of the world. In 2007 he undertook the first swim across the North Pole to highlight the melting of the Arctic sea ice. In 2010 he swam across a glacial lake on Mt Everest to draw attention to the melting glaciers in the Himalayas, and the impact the reduced water supply will have on peace in the region. And last year he undertook a series of swims in the Ross Sea off Antarctica, calling on the 25 nations, with interests in the region (including Russia) to protect the area. In 2013 the United Nations appointed him UN Patron of the Oceans.

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