

TEDTalks, Robert Swan

Let's save the last pristine continent

00:12	Let's go south. All of you are actually going south. This is the direction of south, this way, and if you go 8,000 kilometers out of the back of this room, you will come to as far south as you can go anywhere on Earth, the Pole itself.
00:41	Now, I am not an explorer. I'm not an environmentalist. I'm actually just a survivor, and these photographs that I'm showing you here are dangerous. They are the ice melt of the South and North Poles. And ladies and gentlemen, we need to listen to what these places are telling us, and if we don't, we will end up with our own survival situation here on planet Earth.
01:21	I have faced head-on these places, and to walk across a melting ocean of ice is without doubt the most frightening thing that's ever happened to me.
01:38	Antarctica is such a hopeful place. It is protected by the Antarctic Treaty, signed in 1959. In 1991, a 50-year agreement was entered into that stops any exploitation in Antarctica, and this agreement could be altered, changed, modified, or even abandoned starting in the year 2041. Ladies and gentlemen, people already far up north from here in the Arctic are already taking advantage of this ice melt, taking out resources from areas already that have been covered in ice for the last 10, 20, 30,000, 100,000 years. Can they not join the dots and think, "Why is the ice actually melting?"
02:59	This is such an amazing place, the Antarctic, and I have worked hard for the last 23 years on this mission to make sure that what's happening up here in the North does never happen, cannot happen in the South.
03:21	Where did this all begin? It began for me at the age of 11. Check out that haircut. It's a bit odd. (Laughter) And at the age of 11, I was inspired by the real explorers to want to try to be the first to walk to both Poles. I found it incredibly inspiring that the idea of becoming a polar traveler went down pretty well with girls at parties when I was at university. That was a bit more inspiring. And after years, seven years of fundraising, seven years of being told no, seven years of being told by my family to seek counseling and psychiatric help, eventually three of us found ourselves marching to the South Geographic Pole on the longest unassisted march ever made anywhere on Earth in history. In this photograph, we are standing in an area the size of the United States of America, and we're on our own. We have no radio communications, no backup. Beneath our feet, 90 percent of all the world's ice, 70 percent of all the world's fresh water. We're standing on it. This is the power of Antarctica.
04:52	On this journey, we faced the danger of crevasses, intense cold, so cold that sweat turns to ice inside your clothing, your teeth can crack, water can freeze in your eyes. Let's just say it's a bit chilly. (Laughter) And after 70 desperate days, we arrive at the South Pole. We had done it. But something happened to me on that 70-day journey in 1986 that brought me here, and it hurt. My eyes changed color in 70 days through damage. Our faces blistered out. The skin ripped off and we wondered why. And when we got home, we were told by NASA that a hole in the ozone had been discovered above the South Pole, and we'd walked underneath it the same year it had been discovered. Ultraviolet rays down, hit the ice, bounced back, fried out the eyes, ripped off our faces. It was a bit of a shock – (Laughter) – and it started me thinking.
06:06	In 1989, we now head north. Sixty days, every step away from the safety of land across a frozen ocean. It was desperately cold again. Here's me coming in from washing naked at -60 Celsius. And if anybody ever says to you, "I am cold" – (Laughter) – if they look like this, they are cold, definitely. (Applause)
06:38	And 1,000 kilometers away from the safety of land, disaster strikes. The Arctic Ocean melts beneath our feet four months before it ever had in history, and we're 1,000 kilometers from safety. The ice is crashing around us, grinding, and I'm thinking, "Are we going to die?" But something clicked in my head on this day, as I realized we, as a world, are in a survival situation, and that feeling has never gone away for 25 long years. Back then, we had to march or die. And we're not some TV survivor program. When things go wrong for us, it's life or death, and our brave African-American Daryl, who would become the first American to walk to the North Pole, his heel dropped off from frostbite 200 clicks out. He must keep going, he does, and after 60 days on the ice, we stood at the North Pole. We had done it. Yes, I became the first person in history stupid enough to walk to both Poles, but it was our success.
08:01	And sadly, on return home, it was not all fun. I became very low. To succeed at something is often harder than actually making it happen. I was empty, lonely, financially destroyed. I was without hope, but hope came in the form of the great Jacques Cousteau, and he inspired me to take on the 2041 mission. Being Jacques, he gave me clear instructions: Engage the world leaders, talk to industry and business, and above all, Rob, inspire young people, because they will choose the future of the preservation of Antarctica.

08:48	For the world leaders, we've been to every world Earth Summit, all three of them, with our brave yacht, 2041, twice to Rio, once in '92, once in 2012, and for the Earth Summit in Johannesburg, we made the longest overland voyage ever made with a yacht, 13,000 kilometers around the whole of Southern Africa doing our best to inspire over a million young people in person about 2041 and about their environment.
09:28	For the last 11 years, we have taken over 1,000 people, people from industry and business, women and men from companies, students from all over the world, down to Antarctica, and during those missions, we've managed to pull out over 1,500 tons of twisted metal left in Antarctica. That took eight years, and I'm so proud of it because we recycled all of it back here in South America. I have been inspired ever since I could walk to recycle by my mum. Here she is, and my mum – (Applause) – my mum is still recycling, and as she is in her 100th year, isn't that fantastic? (Applause) And when – I love my mum. (Laughter) But when Mum was born, the population of our planet was only 1.8 billion people, and talking in terms of billions, we have taken young people from industry and business from India, from China. These are game-changing nations, and will be hugely important in the decision about the preservation of the Antarctic. Unbelievably, we've engaged and inspired women to come from the Middle East, often for the first time they've represented their nations in Antarctica. Fantastic people, so inspired. To look after Antarctica, you've got to first engage people with this extraordinary place, form a relationship, form a bond, form some love. It is such a privilege to go to Antarctica, I can't tell you. I feel so lucky, and I've been 35 times in my life, and all those people who come with us return home as great champions, not only for Antarctica, but for local issues back in their own nations.
11:49	Let's go back to where we began: the ice melt of the North and South Poles. And it's not good news. NASA informed us six months ago that the Western Antarctic Ice Shelf is now disintegrating. Huge areas of ice – look how big Antarctica is even compared to here – Huge areas of ice are breaking off from Antarctica, the size of small nations. And NASA have calculated that the sea level will rise, it is definite, by one meter in the next 100 years, the same time that my mum has been on planet Earth. It's going to happen, and I've realized that the preservation of Antarctica and our survival here on Earth are linked. And there is a very simple solution. If we are using more renewable energy in the real world, if we are being more efficient with the energy here, running our energy mix in a cleaner way, there will be no financial reason to go and exploit Antarctica. It won't make financial sense, and if we manage our energy better, we also may be able to slow down, maybe even stop, this great ice melt that threatens us.
13:25	It's a big challenge, and what is our response to it? We've got to go back one last time, and at the end of next year, we will go back to the South Geographic Pole, where we arrived 30 years ago on foot, and retrace our steps of 1,600 kilometers, but this time only using renewable energy to survive. We will walk across those icecaps, which far down below are melting, hopefully inspiring some solutions on that issue.
14:05	This is my son, Barney. He is coming with me. He is committed to walking side by side with his father, and what he will do is to translate these messages and inspire these messages to the minds of future young leaders. I'm extremely proud of him. Good on him, Barney.
14:31	Ladies and gentlemen, a survivor – and I'm good – a survivor sees a problem and doesn't go, "Whatever." A survivor sees a problem and deals with that problem before it becomes a threat. We have 27 years to preserve the Antarctic. We all own it. We all have responsibility. The fact that nobody owns it maybe means that we can succeed. Antarctica is a moral line in the snow, and on one side of that line we should fight, fight hard for this one beautiful, pristine place left alone on Earth. I know it's possible. We are going to do it. And I'll leave you with these words from Goethe. I've tried to live by them.
15:35	"If you can do, or dream you can, begin it now, for boldness has genius, power and magic in it."
15:52	Good luck to you all.
15:54	Thank you very much.
15:56	(Applause)