Chancellor Dharker,

It is an honour today to welcome our graduand Dr Thomas Brooks, the Chief Scientist of the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (or IUCN), which is the only environmental organisation to be a Permanent Observer to the United Nations General Assembly. For the last three decades Thomas has been at the forefront of attempts to address global biodiversity conservation issues in his roles at Conservation International, NatureServe and IUCN, and is held in the highest regard by conservation scientists as a truly inspirational figure.

Thomas was born and raised in Brighton. He owes his love of nature to his parents, and grandparents, and from an early age used to accompany them bird watching. In fact, Thomas's earliest memory is of his pushchair being attacked by a gaggle of Hawaiian geese at Sir Peter Scott's Wildfowl & Wetlands Trust in Slimbridge. Instead of being put off by the assault, Thomas embraced nature. Significantly, the geese in question were themselves an exciting conservation story, as they had been almost driven to extinction but are now thriving again. Clearly, as his friend and colleague Dr Frank Hawkins told me "Thomas's destiny was foretold".

After leaving school, Thomas studied Geography at Cambridge University, but his hobbies were as all-consuming as his studies.

He joined the Cambridge Bird Club, and the University's Explorers and Travellers club and this fired a lifelong love of, as Thomas puts it "searching for rare birds in obscure places" and he spent the following three summers in the Philippines, Paraguay and Indonesia respectively. He made lasting friendships with people such as Stuart Butchart who became future colleagues. This was at a time when conservation ideas such as the Red List of Threatened Species - a critical indicator of the health of the world's biodiversity - were becoming well-developed, and Thomas became convinced that his future lay along this path.

However, most of the people that Thomas travelled with were zoologists, and when he sent letters to several institutions trying to study for a bird-related PhD, he discovered that none of them were interested in taking on a geographer. But a rejection letter from Imperial mentioned a possible opportunity at the University of Tennessee with Professor Stuart Pimm, and following a conversation at an extinction rates conference, Thomas was soon studying for his PhD in – as he puts it – the land of "cowboy boots and country music". Thomas wanted to test the Red list empirically both at the regional and global scale and help to predict the actual likelihood of extinction. He swiftly wrote a proposal to the National Geographic Society to fund the field component of his PhD in Kenya, where he could study what happens to bird communities as ecosystems change.

Thomas's career flourished and after gaining his PhD, he undertook research at the University of Arkansas and then became an Assistant Research Professor in the Zoological Museum at the University of Copenhagen. All through this time, Thomas was forming a network of scientific collaborators, that has gone on to help Thomas to have a massive impact on conservation initiatives. Most importantly, during the long stints on the computer in the Zoological Museum, he met and fell in love with his wife Line who was also studying at the University as an entomologist.

Thomas's exceptional research outputs, scientific reputation, and his talent at drawing together transdisciplinary partners to tackle conservation issues, saw him involved in many varied projects over the years when he was employed first by Conservation International (CI), and then by NatureServe. Some highlights include work on a standard methodology for identifying sites that contribute significantly to the global persistence of all types of biodiversity and participating in the expanding coverage of the Red List. Throughout this, Thomas worked with many independent bodies, including the IUCN, which is a very large union comprised of governments and civil society organisations, and which operates slowly, but holds more authority than any other conservation body.

It seemed somehow inevitable that Thomas, with his scientific credentials, wide global network of colleagues, and an enviable capacity to guide policy development through political difficulties, should get such a key job at IUCN. He is part scientist, part leader, and part diplomat. As Frank Hawkins explained "Thomas's role is very challenging…he is at the service of the scientific community…and also brings all IUCN constituencies together which is a real triumph and powerfully drives the production of scientific papers, policies, and white papers."

One important development which involved both Thomas and Newcastle University was the development of the Species Threat Abatement and Restoration metric, otherwise known as the STAR metric. Our own Professor Philip McGowan told me that he and his colleague Dr Louise Mair, met for an informal chat with Thomas at the COP14 conference in October 2018, as they all wanted to develop strategic ways of tackling threats to species. Phil remembers that as they talked, he "could see the lightbulbs going off in Thomas's head", and within four months, funding had been secured. Thomas had the vision to see that STAR would be a significant development, he had the strategy to deliver on it and he helped to get it established at Newcastle. The STAR metric is now finding traction amongst business, finance, policy and civil society efforts to quantify potential impacts of biodiversity interventions.

Another very recent achievement was Thomas's work to facilitate IUCN adopting the first-ever global policy on synthetic biology and nature conservation. Thomas is enthusiastic about mechanisms like the Red lists, the STAR metric, and the synthetic biology framework because as he told me "they inform practical decision making" and can help conservation initiatives scale up dramatically. He is very proud of these achievements, and his work on Key Biodiversity Areas, but he is of course proudest of all, of his wonderful family. I'd like to extend a very warm welcome to his wife Line, son Rasmus, and daughter Naja, who are joining us today.

So how does someone so driven and energetic unwind outside of his beloved birding? Well Line tells me that since the pandemic Thomas has encroached on her turf by developing an interest in moths. He also gets regularly beaten by his children at tennis, which I suppose means that unlike his many other achievements, his dream of becoming a Wimbledon champion will remain unfulfilled. But as his wife and colleagues have all told me, he remains a world champion at power napping.

Chancellor Dharker, as a University that carries out leading edge research in conservation science and policy, it is fitting that we recognise the outstanding contributions of someone whose entire career has contributed significantly to the future of life on this planet, and I am proud to present to you Dr Thomas Brooks for the award of Doctor of Science, *honoris causa*.

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