

Mediterranean Sea, Campaigns and Awareness: Our Way

Lily Venizelos. Mediterranean Association to Save the Sea Turtles (MEDASSET), Greece

Different kinds of waste inundate our seas creating an ecological problem that affects the biodiversity and survival of the fauna. This kind of rubbish includes drifting fishing nets. The joint initiative of different environmental NGOs, “Healthy Sea Initiative: A Journey from Waste to Wear”, has emerged to combat this issue and clean the seas of this kind of residue to later reuse it as textile products. There are also other notable initiatives carried out by the international Greek NGO MEDASSET such as Clean Seas: Swear to Care, which asks tourists to promise not to soil beaches with debris such as cigarette butts; You See The Difference: A Turtle Does Not tries to raise people’s awareness about the threat plastic bags pose to sea turtles; and Join Up & Clean Up to teach people, particularly children and youths, about this issue, making them clean up residual materials found on beaches.

Hundreds of thousands of tons of abandoned, drifting fishing nets are currently wandering our seas and oceans. These synthetic nets can persist in the marine environment for hundreds of years, indiscriminately capturing and killing marine animals, smothering habitats and acting as hazards to navigation. The localised nature of lost and abandoned nets creates ecological problems for ecosystems and marine species but it also allows focused recovery action. Recovered nets are usually dumped in landfills or incinerated.

The Healthy Seas Initiative is a joint venture of Environmental Non-Governmental Organisations (ENGOS) and businesses whose objective is to remove waste, such as abandoned fishing nets, from the seas. The initiative’s founders are the European Centre for Nature Conservation (ECNC) Land & Sea Group, Aquafil Nylon 6 producers (Italy) with the Eco-

nyl Regeneration System Project and Star Sock (Netherlands), a wholesale socks business that focuses on both environmental and economic sustainability. Salvaged nets are transformed into high-quality nylon yarn with which new products are created.

Derelict fishing gear poses serious environmental, conservation, animal welfare, human health and economic costs that are of relevance to many stakeholders. The Healthy Seas, a Journey from Waste to Wear initiative aims to remove waste, in particular fishing nets from the seas for the purpose of creating healthier seas and recycling marine litter into textile products. Ghost nets are a global problem that requires urgent action. According to the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), derelict fishing gear makes up for one tenth of all marine litter, equivalent to 640,000 tons a year. The adverse impacts of

derelict fishing gear have been exacerbated by the introduction of non-biodegradable fishing gear, with many of the plastics used predicted to persist in the marine environment for up to 600 years. Derelict fishing gear continues to catch fish more than eight years after being lost. It acts as a source of, and vehicle for, persistent toxic chemical pollution in the ocean; and it represents a threat to human health, for example to maritime traffic and scuba divers through propeller entanglement.^{1,2}

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MEDASSET Greece joined the Healthy Seas, a Journey from Waste to Wear initiative in 2015. Since 2015, MEDASSET has collected and recycled over 50 tons of fishing nets during eight diving missions and has organised six fishing net collection points in cooperation with fishing associations all over Greece. Reclaimed nets are sent to be cleaned of foreign materials such as organic, plastic or metallic elements in Turkey and Lithuania, eventually ending up in Slovenia for processing and conversion into premium quality ECONYL® yarn by Italian Group Aquafil, from which brand new consumer products are produced, such as socks, swimwear, carpets and sportswear. ECONYL® yarn can be recycled endlessly without any loss of material quality.

To promote the Healthy Seas Initiative, in 2016 MEDASSET organised a fashion design competition with AKTO College of Art and Design in Greece, where clothes were made out

of recycled discarded net material (ECONYL®). Ten out of the twenty winning garments were exhibited at Golden Hall Shopping Mall in Athens, the CRETAQUARIUM in Crete (2016) and finally the Deltapark in the Netherlands (2017) for two years. By the end of this tour, the exhibition will have been seen by over one million people.

Emphasis is placed on raising public awareness about the environmental damage caused by ghost fishing gear and on the ecological and economic importance of healthy seas.

Since 2013, Healthy Seas has removed over 311 tons of nets from 5 countries in Europe with the involvement of more than 75 volunteer divers. Nets recovery increased by 660% from 2013 (20 tons) to 2016 (152 tons). The regeneration of fishing nets can support business models that offer a self-sustaining and scalable solution to the problem of waste fishing nets across Europe.

Clean Seas: Swear to Care

Marine litter is a global issue that has an enormous environmental and economic impact, while also presenting a significant threat to human health and aesthetics. Litter and all sorts of rubbish are being dumped into the seas and oceans as an inexpensive method of disposal, even today. We come across cigarette butts, plastic and other kinds of litter even in the remotest corners of the earth, thousands of miles away from areas of human habitation. It is estimated that 80% of all marine litter originates from land-based sources while 20% of it is the result of human activities at sea.

In 2015, MEDASSET launched an ongoing campaign against marine litter Clean Seas:

1. G. Macfadyen, T. Huntington and R. Cappell, *Abandoned, lost or otherwise discarded fishing gear*, UNEP Regional Seas Reports and Studies, No. 185, 2009; FAO Fisheries and Aquaculture Technical Paper, No. 523, Rome, UNEP/FAO.

2. A. Butterworth, I. Clegg and C. Bass, *Untangled – Marine debris: a global picture of the impact on animal welfare and of animal -focused solutions*, London, World Society for the Protection of Animals, 2012.



International campaign against plastic bags.

Swear to Care, which aims to encourage visitors to Greek beaches to protect marine life with the simple yet powerful act of making a promise on a dedicated website www.katharesthalasses.gr.

Using the motto “We care for our host destinations”, the campaign places particular emphasis on the protection of tourist destinations and invites the businesses active in the tourism sector and located by the sea to join its network. Several popular Greek personalities from the world of TV and radio, a singer, a Paralympic swimming champion and a prize-winning chef pledged their support and as ambassadors of the 2016 campaign spread the word to their fans through social media. Since 2015, 12,270 promises have been made, including the support of 13 national partners and 8,207 followers on social media.

You See The Difference, A Turtle Does Not

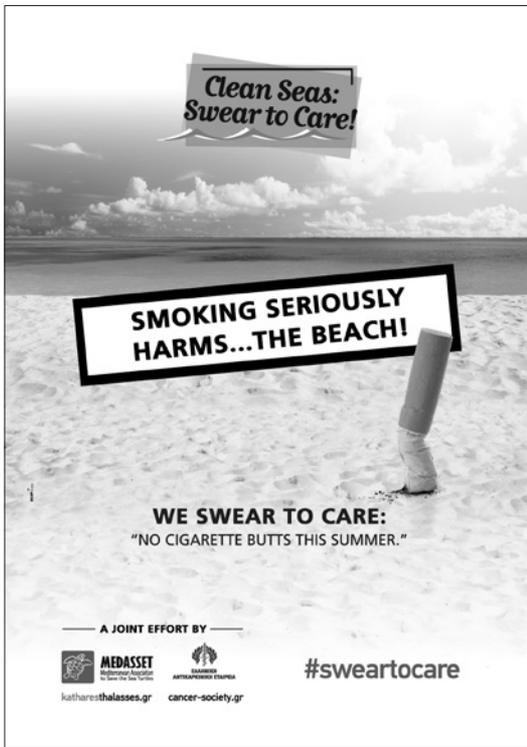
Each year turtles, birds and other marine animals die unnecessarily after swallowing marine litter, especially plastic, due to its

shape and size. Specifically, sea turtles mistake the plastic bags that end up in the sea for their favourite delicacy, the jellyfish. Plastics ingestion by sea turtles may cause them to suffocate, block their digestive tract and make them feel full, though in reality they may be starving to death! Furthermore, air bubbles in plastics can prevent turtles from diving for food.

About 100 different animal and plant species have been recorded living on the body of one single loggerhead, making an entire mobile, living, breathing ecosystem.

To celebrate World Turtle Day on May 23, 2012, MEDASSET launched an innovative poster for its international campaign against plastic bags to raise awareness about their devastating effects on marine life: “You See the Difference. A Turtle Does Not.” Two days after its launch on Facebook, the image went viral and has since been seen by millions throughout the world!

The number of groups and institutions that got in touch asking to share the poster was overwhelming. Since 2012 the image went viral on



A campaign against marine litter.

Facebook, shared over 176,000 times within a month of its release. It was adopted by dozens of organisations, aquariums and universities in 29 countries around the world and translated into 15 languages. It was displayed in Athens International Airport and Tegel Airport in Berlin, made into a short animated PSA and

aired internationally on the Discovery Channel among others.

Join In & Clean Up

Researchers are just beginning to understand the important ecological roles sea turtles play in marine and coastal ecosystems. They are important indicators of the health of coastal and marine environments on both local and global scales. Green turtles graze on seagrass and algae making the seabed healthier and more productive, allowing commercially important species such as shrimp, lobster and fish to thrive. Leatherbacks and loggerheads consume jellyfish, which feed on fish larvae and are a threat to human activities such as tourism. Also, by depositing their eggs on beaches, they transport vital nutrients from the seas to coastal and inshore habitats.

Since 1998, MEDASSET has been campaigning on Small Garbage. Small garbage is any solid piece of litter which in its present state or by degrading into a new state has a devastating effect on the marine environment. The campaign involves making presentations, distributing educational material and carrying out awareness and cleanup activities on the beach. The campaign's goal is to educate the public with a special emphasis on school children. Until 2014, 12,862 school children and volunteers had performed 72 beach clean-ups, collecting 21 tons of litter covering 67 km of coastline.