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Seven Clean Seas: Scaling Impact and Sustainability in Ocean Plastic Conservation

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> *"We will not recycle our way out of the plastic pollution crisis: we need a systemic transformation to achieve the transition to a circular economy."*(United Nations Environment Programme, 2025)
>
> (**Inger Andersen, UNEP Executive Director**)

Introduction

In early 2025, Tom Peacock-Nazil (Tom), the Founder and CEO of Seven Clean Seas, was busy sitting in his Singapore office, poring over the latest annual impact report *(Annual Impact Report 2023)*. At the time, his organisation had reached a significant milestone: removing more than four million kilograms of plastic from oceans and rivers. The next goal was even greater removing 10 million kilograms by the end of the year *(Karishma & Lim, 2024)*. The question was how?

The crisis was undeniable: over 11 million metric tons *(United Nations Environment Programme, 2022)* of plastic waste were pouring into marine ecosystems yearly. Plastic debris was suffocating ocean life, coastal communities were drowning in waste, and global policy implementation was adrift. Public awareness of corporate sustainability promises and pledges was rising. Still, it was slow to drive meaningful change, and organisations were unsure how to fund it. Ocean cleanup was not enough as a stand-alone sustainable solution forcing Tom to wonder if the business model

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needs to evolve further. **(Watch the interview of Tom,** *'Sustainability: Episode 1 with Tom Peacock-Nazil, Seven Clean Seas', here at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rETU_DCh65M)*

As it scaled, financial sustainability was an increasingly growing concern for Seven Clean Seas. Should the company grow quickly or take a slower approach? Tom had to decide whether to pursue venture capital or continue with a strategic, partnership driven expansion. He also had to consider how the company should approach recycling innovation should the company develop proprietary recycling technology or partner with existing recyclers? Tom was also challenged with the task of community engagement. It was important to ensure that waste workers were paid fairly and that large-scale cleanup efforts were managed carefully and sustainably.

These decisions would shape the future of Seven Clean Seas and contribute to the global battle to rid the seas of plastic. As time passed and key stakeholders demanded results, Tom had to decide how Seven Clean Seas could create a broader impact while remaining financially sustainable in the long run.

The Ocean Plastic Crisis and Seven Clean Seas' Mission

The growth of plastic pollution severely impacted marine ecosystems, wildlife, and human health, a global crisis spreading throughout the oceans. An estimated 75–199 million tons of plastic debris *(United Nations Environment Programme, 2025)* contaminated marine environments (see Figure 1). This was driven by around 8–10 million metric tons of plastic *(Fava, 2022)* waste entering the oceans annually (see Figure 2).

Unless major intervention had been taken, this figure was projected to triple by 2040, and plastic could account for more than all the fish in the sea by 2050 *(Plastic Soup Foundation, 2021)*. Due to its devastating impact on marine life, plastic pollution kills around 100 million marine animals a year, either as consumers or victims of debris such as through ingestion or entanglement, causing injury, starvation, or suffocation.

This crisis was primarily caused by a lack of effective waste management systems, especially in rapidly urbanising coastal areas where plastic waste often ends up in rivers (see Figure 3). Single-use plastic was a major contributor, with approximately 40 percent *(Plastic Soup Foundation, 2021)* of all plastic production dedicated to such materials. Designed for rapid disposal, these packaging materials and travel items, including lighters, often escaped proper collection and recycling before drifting into rivers and oceans. Additionally, discarded fishing gear, mismanaged waste, and abandoned nets from maritime activities like fishing and shipping intensified the problem (see Figure 4).

The environmental toll of plastic pollution was staggering. Plastic debris blanketed corals, disrupted marine food chains, and jeopardised the world's vital oceanic ecosystems, threatening

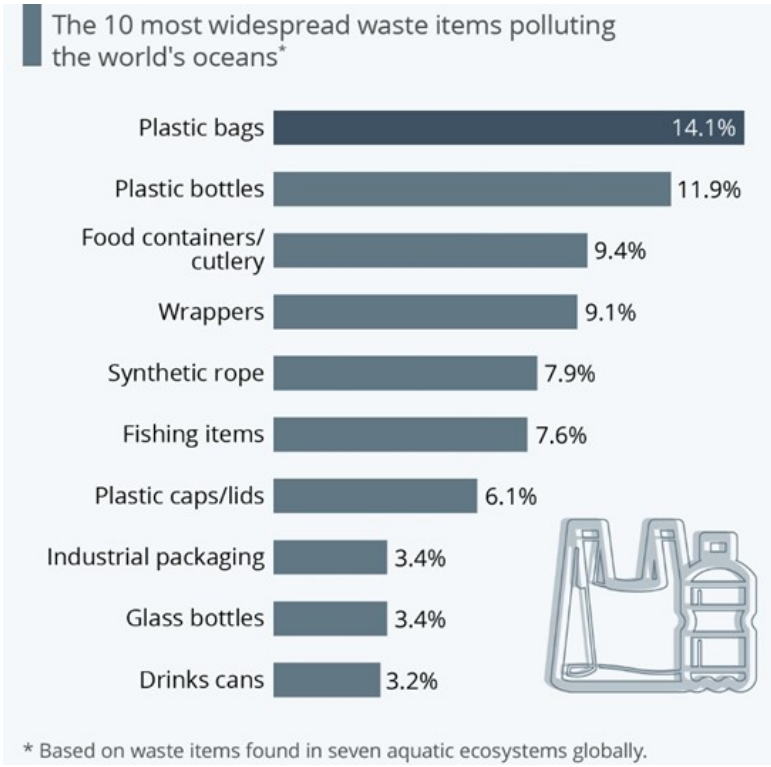


Figure 1: Plastic Items Dominate Ocean Garbage

Source: *McCarthy Niall, "Plastic Items Dominate Ocean Garbage", Statista, June 11, 2021, https://www.statista.com/chart/25056/waste-items-polluting-oceans/.*

biodiversity. Once in the water, it was swallowed by marine animals with devastating effects, such as digestive blockages and nutrient deficiencies, leading to malnutrition and death *(Pilapitiya & Ratnayake, 2024)*.

Plastic pollution also poses risks to human health beyond marine life. For a good reason: tiny bits of plastic, called microplastics, were found in drinking water, seawater, seafood (including shellfish), and even human blood. The long-term effects of microplastic exposure remained unknown, but preliminary research suggested links to inflammation, endocrine disruption, and other health issues *(Dąbrowska et al., 2021)*.

The economic costs associated with plastic pollution were equally significant. Marine debris damaged industries such as fisheries, tourism, and shipping, with damages estimated at up to US$2.5 trillion per year *(Beaumont et al., 2019)*. Many countries experienced declining



Figure 2: Plastic Pollution in Oceans
Source: *Becky McKay, "Global Plastic Pollution Statistics and Facts", GREENMATCH, September 17, 2024, https://www.greenmatch.co.uk/blog/plastic-pollution-facts.*

fish populations, increased costs for cleaning beaches and harbours, and revenue losses due to pollution-related environmental degradation, particularly in coastal economies *(Cressey, 2016)*.

Whether addressing the expanding ocean plastic crisis or other environmental challenges of similar magnitude, comprehensive strategies were needed, including enhanced waste management infrastructure, reductions in single-use plastics, international cooperation, and strengthened policies to reduce plastic pollution at its source. Without urgent action, the oceans—and, by extension, the planet remained at serious risk *(Comăniță et al., 2016)* .

The Genesis of Seven Clean Seas: A Mission to Restore the Oceans

What turned the corner for Tom was not a statistic or a report it was a paradise lost. In 2013, while travelling across Southeast Asia, Tom and his wife, Pamela Correia (Pamela), spent time on Sunrise Beach, Ko Lipe Island, Thailand. However, instead of pristine shores, they found a beach engulfed by piles of plastic (see Figure 5). Seashells had been replaced with broken fishing gear, bottles, and wrappers. Marine life, which once found sanctuary in the turquoise waters, was now surrounded by floating debris. The scale of pollution was staggering, and signs of damage indicated that this was not an isolated incident *(Ilyas et al., 2019)*.

The experience stayed with them. With every trip to a coastal region, the pattern remained the same polluted waters, suffering wildlife, and communities overwhelmed by waste. It was not just about plastic waste; it reflected systemic inaction. Despite governments and corporations making

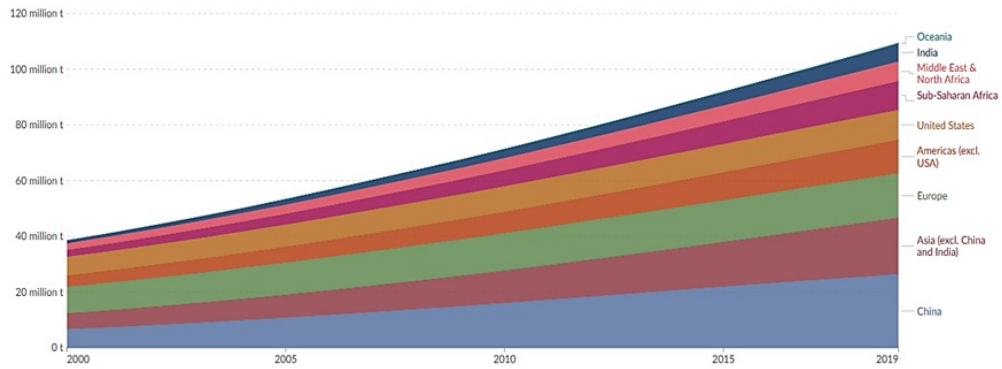


Figure 3: Plastic Waste Accumulated In Rivers and Lakes, 2000 to 2019

Source: *OECD, "Plastic waste accumulated in rivers and lakes, 2000 to 2019", Our World in Data, 2022, https://ourworldindata.org/grapher/plastic-waste-accumulated-rivers-lakes.*

pledges for environmental action, plastic waste continued to be produced at an ever-increasing rate. Plastic pollution has become an economic, social, and environmental burden destroying livelihoods, threatening food security, and endangering public health *(International Union for Conservation of Nature, 2024)*.

The urgency of the issue weighed heavily on Tom back in Singapore. How had they become dumping grounds in a world so dependent on the oceans? Many organisations were focused on preventing future plastic waste but did little to address the millions of tons already polluting marine environments. Recognising the urgent need for large-scale intervention, Tom decided to act.

From Grassroots to Global: The Birth of Seven Clean Seas

Tom and Pamela were determined and started with small efforts. In 2018, they organised community-driven beach cleanups in Singapore, attracting people eager to join forces in combating the visible issue of plastic waste. What began as a series of weekend cleanups quickly gained traction and went viral. They wanted to contribute but lacked a structured approach to creating a lasting impact. This led to one clear conclusion: if any effort was to be truly sustainable, it needed to go beyond sporadic cleanups and evolve into a system that not only removed trash from the ocean but also prevented it from entering in the first place *(Cragg, 2020)*.

At the end of 2018, Seven Clean Seas was officially founded with a clear mission: by 2025, it would remove 10 million kilograms of plastic from the oceans. This mission extended far beyond cleanup it focused on reimagining how ocean plastic pollution should be addressed. As the organisation took shape, its four core values were established as the foundation on which it

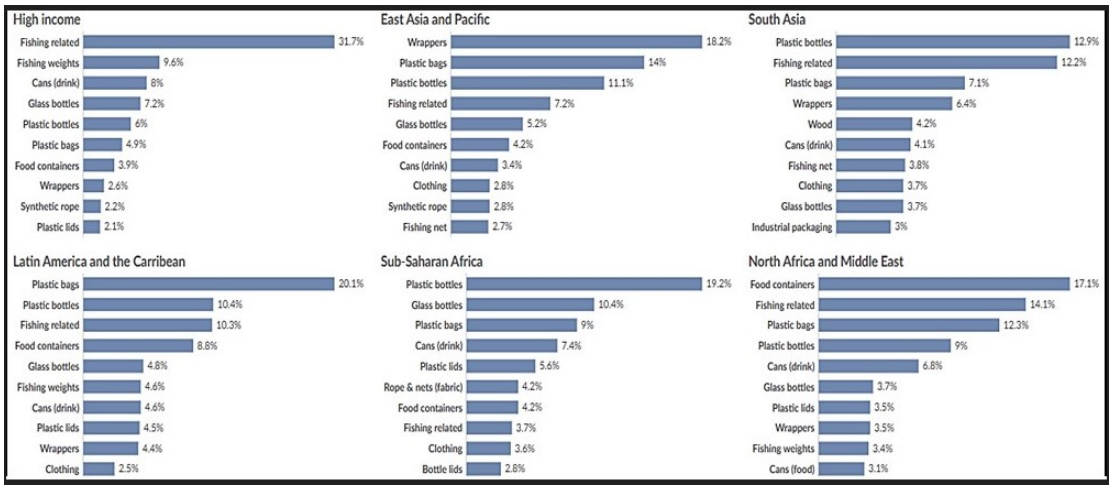


Figure 4: Most Common Items of *Waste** in The Ocean By Region

*Each item's share of total litter in nearshore waters, which are within 100 kilometres of the coast.

Source: *Morales-Caselles et al., "An Inshore–Offshore Sorting System Revealed from Global Classification of Ocean Litter", Our World in Data, 2021, https://ourworldindata.org/grapher/waste-items-ocean-region.*

would operate and rely in the long term: 'Unyielding Ambition, Integrity in Action, Dignity in Employment, and Comprehensive Conservation' *(Seven Clean Seas. (n.d.))*.

Scaling Impact: Achievements and Partnerships Driving Change

Seven Clean Seas claimed that it was able to pick up over 4 million kilograms of plastic *(Myring, 2024)* from the ocean, rivers, and coastlines, putting the company among the leaders in ocean plastic pickup. This strategy went beyond waste collection; it used a multipronged approach. Rather than relying on reactive cleanup efforts, Tom had centred the company's actions on high-polluting areas that contributed the most plastic to the ocean.

These wastes were collected from coastal regions and river systems in Indonesia and Thailand, two of the most plastic-polluted countries on Earth (see Figure 6). Using a standardised system allowed Seven Clean Seas to scale consistently through professional cleanup teams instead of volunteer initiatives. More than 100 full-time waste collectors *(ést.lab., n.d.)* were employed to ensure that cleanup efforts continued and were not dependent on the randomness of donations or labour availability.

One of Seven Clean Seas' key differentiators was that the company had gone the extra mile and applied a scientific methodology for tracking plastic recovery. It gathered, sorted, categorized,



Figure 5: Garbage Problem on The Island of Koh Lipe, Thailand
Source: *Tegtmeyer Sascha, "Koh Lipe Experiences - Garbage Threatens the Island Paradise", Just Wanderlust, 2024, https://www.just-wanderlust.com/en/travel-vacation/koh-lipe-muell*

and documented the plastic on a granular level, providing data-driven insights to stakeholders regarding the root causes of plastic pollution in any given area and quantifying how much plastic had been removed from any specific location *(Seven Clean Seas, 2023)*.

However, this was just the start. Seven Clean Seas hoped to remove 10 million kilograms by the end of 2025, and it was actively trying to exponentially scale up its operations without becoming fiscally unsustainable. However, this required more partnerships, more investment in waste collection infrastructure, and more engagement from the community.

River Cleanup Partnerships: Tackling Plastic at Its Source

Intensifying efforts to intercept plastic before it reached the sea, Seven Clean Seas knew that 80 percent *(United Nations Environment Programme, 2021)* of ocean pollution flowed from land, chiefly through rivers. This also led to the integration of governance, namely key partnerships that enabled the implementation of river-based waste collection systems in high-risk areas.

The most efficient partnership in Thailand's Chao Phraya River collected tons of waste, including plastic, before reaching the Gulf of Thailand (see Figure 7). Seven Clean Seas brought together local authorities, environmental organisations, and corporate sponsors to carry out targeted interventions, such as floating barriers, plastic-trapping systems, and locally based waste collection hubs *(United Nations Environment Programme, 2021)*.

In Indonesia, waste collection infrastructure around Jakarta's polluted river systems was lacking, and such efforts were necessary to preserve the marine ecosystem. Seven Clean Seas worked



Figure 6: Countries with The Highest Plastic Pollution Released Into Oceans In Tonnes (2021)
Source: *Becky McKay, "Global Plastic Pollution Statistics and Facts", GREENMATCH, September 17, 2024, https://www.greenmatch.co.uk/blog/plastic-pollution-facts.*

with local governments and businesses to clear thousands of tons of plastic from the aquatic ecosystem before it reached the ocean. Not only did these initiatives help reduce plastic leakage, but they also provided a means of generating livelihoods for local communities. The projects accomplished environmental and economic benefits; they produced jobs and provided training for task managers, sorters, and recyclers to aid in collecting, sorting, and recycling *(Asia Food Journal, 2023)*. In Tom's words, 'We quickly realized that it was extremely efficient to focus on coastal communities where leakage is high. . . We find a coastal community with a thousand households and no waste management, period' *(Wiederholt, 2023)*.

Fair Wages for Waste Management Workers: A People-first Approach

Seven Clean Seas knew that plastic pollution went well beyond the environment and was also a social and economic issue. Informal waste pickers played an essential role in the recycling market system in the developing world but worked in very hazardous conditions and earned wages below the subsistence level.

Seven Clean Seas integrated fair employment into its cleanup model as a solution. Frontline waste collectors who were not on volunteer lists but had stable jobs for fair wages under dignified work conditions were engaged. It made waste management a job, albeit a low-status, last resort one *(Sustainable Packaging News, 2023)*.

Due to its living wage calculations, Tom had set up a fair wage policy so that workers could

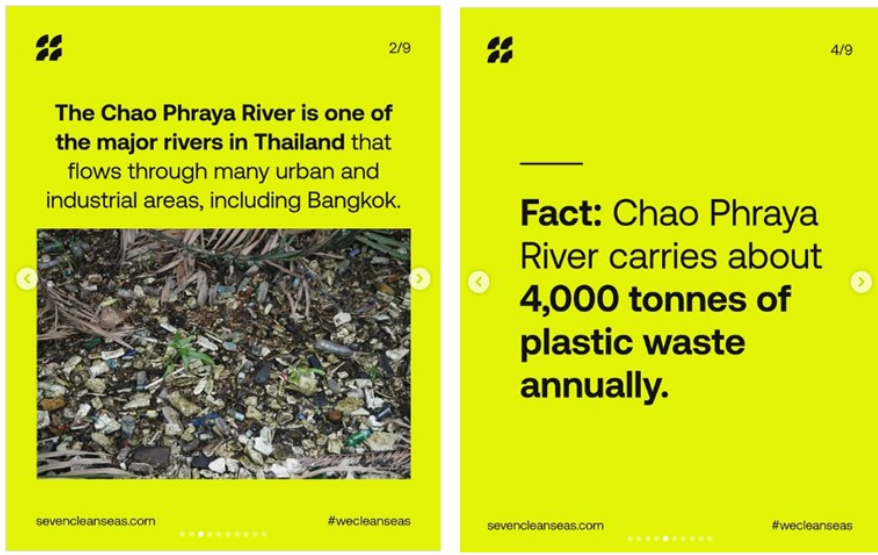


Figure 7: Chao Phraya River In Thailand: Alarming Level of Plastic Pollution

Source: *Seven Clean Seas (@sevencleanseas), "All about Plastic Pollution in Thailand's Chao Phraya River", Instagram, November 30, 2023, https://www.instagram.com/sevencleanseas/p/C0RBwvlSPfT/?img_index=3.*

support themselves and their families. Furthermore, employees were given protective equipment, training, and assistance to mitigate known health risks from waste collection.

Through Seven Clean Seas, Tom successfully demonstrated that working together for the ocean was possible and that environmentally minded actions and social responsibility were two sides of the same coin. Apart from strengthening operations through fair and dignified wages for waste collectors, the organisation's work not only deepened local engagement and participation but also increased the level of trust among leaders and residents.

Innovating for a Sustainable Future

Its ambitions expanded as Seven Clean Seas grew. The Plastic Credits initiative, launched in 2021, enabled companies to offset their plastic footprint by funding cleanup efforts through corporate sponsorship *(Duenas, 2023)*. Not only did this model provide long-term funding for plastic waste reduction, but it also held producers accountable. Partnerships with major brands such as The Economist Group, Singapore Zoo, and the FIFA World Cup 2022 *(Singapore FinTech Festival, 2025)* demonstrated that environmental responsibility could be integrated into corporate strategies to achieve plastic neutrality.

By 2023, what had once been solely about removal had evolved into a focused transformation. As awareness grew regarding traditional recycling infrastructure failing to process low-value ocean plastics, Seven Clean Seas began exploring circular economy solutions repurposing collected waste into durable products such as roof tiles and construction materials *(BE WTR News, 2024)*.

Innovating for a Circular Economy and Financial Sustainability

Tom sifted through the latest impact report from his Singapore office, tracing numbers with his fingers and projecting scenarios and challenges ahead. Seven Clean Seas has come a long way since its early days of grassroots beach cleanups. The organisation had removed more than four million kilograms of plastic, built strategic partnerships for collecting global river based waste, and created fair-wage jobs for waste collectors in some of the most plastic-polluted regions in the world. But the weight of responsibility grew heavier, and the impact was undeniable.

The path to this point had always been uncertain the mission had remained the same: to remove 10 million kilograms of plastic from the ocean by 2025 but today, the challenge had become more complex. Cleanup alone was no longer enough. Addressing plastic waste on this scale meant recognising that the environmental cycle was broken plastic entering the environment needed to be prevented from returning. The natural next step was transforming ocean plastic from waste to resource. As Tom studied the plans for Seven Clean Seas' circular economy model *(ECCA Family Foundation)*, he understood that ambition was easy execution was the true challenge.

Turning Ocean Plastic into Value: The Weight of a Pioneering Vision

Staring at the prototype brick on his desk, Tom leaned back in his chair. The brick was solid, sturdy, and unassuming a simple rectangle of compressed plastic that looked no different from the millions of construction bricks used worldwide (see Figure 8).

However, it was so much more. This small innovation could close the ocean plastic loop, converting waste into a second life instead of allowing it to be discarded into the ocean once more. Seven Clean Seas' initiative to turn marine plastic waste into construction materials could revolutionise how conservation organisations approach waste not as a problem to clean up but as a resource to be utilised.

It was a promising idea. Pilot projects with local builders had already been launched in Indonesia and Thailand, where local builders were eager to use plastic bricks and roof tiles for affordable housing and infrastructure projects (*Tech in Asia, 2024*). Repurposing ocean plastic into low-cost, durable alternatives could provide an economic model that sustained itself while positively impacting communities in regions where traditional construction materials were expensive and difficult to obtain.

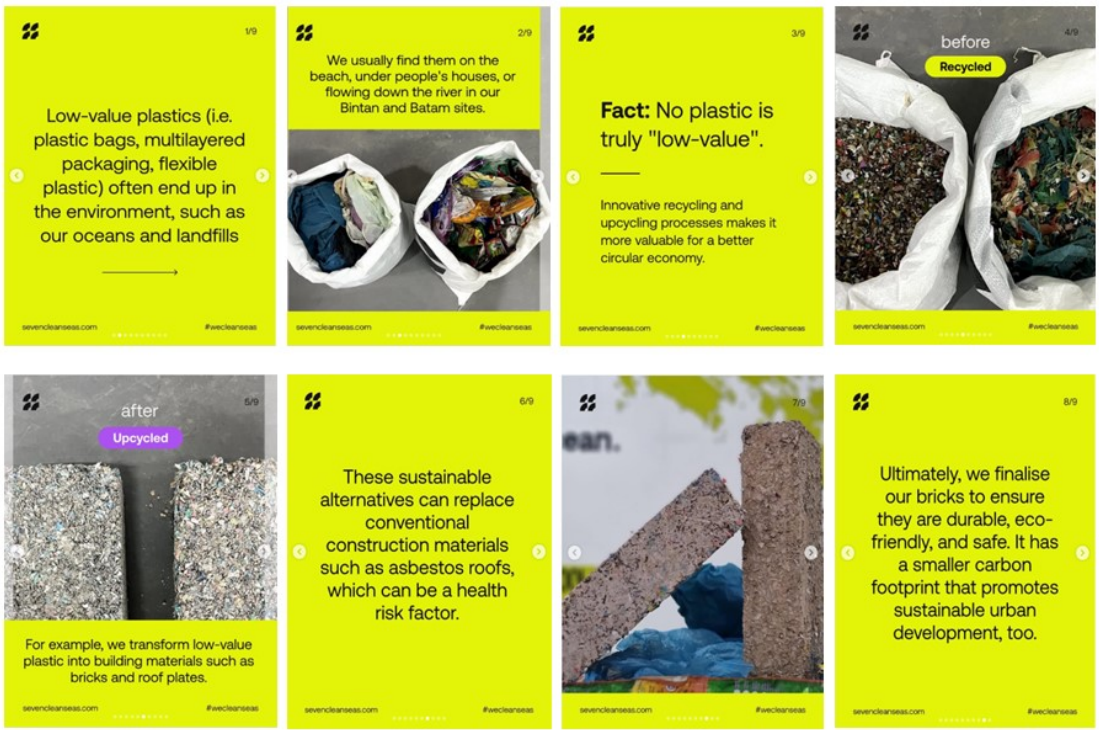


Figure 8: Seven Clean Seas-Turning Trash Into Treasure: A Plastic Brick!
Source: *Seven Clean Seas (@sevencleanseas), "From Low-value Plastics to high-value Construction Materials", Instagram, November 10, 2023, https://www.instagram.com/sevencleanseas/p/CzdcuYmyuI4/?img_index=8.*

Yet Tom's optimism collided with reality as he reviewed the operational data. Scaling this initiative has proven unreasonably complex. What the company retrieved from the ocean was unlike other types of plastic waste, it was degraded saltwater plastic, brittle, full of other debris, and far more difficult to work with than post-industrial or household plastic waste. Specialised equipment, additional sorting and cleaning steps, and suitable infrastructure were lacking in the regions where Seven Clean Seas operated, making the recycling process highly challenging.

The logical question loomed: Tom would either need to develop proprietary recycling technology to ensure complete control over processing or identify established recyclers with existing infrastructure with whom to collaborate.

The company had control, innovation, and ownership; Tom could recycle marine plastic in a way that held real potential. Seven Clean Seas could develop new recycling methods specifically

designed for degraded ocean plastic, ensuring the integrity of its mission. However, the investment required was immense, as considerable investment would be needed to develop the technology, establish plants, and run operations.

Alternatively, Tom could move faster by partnering with existing recyclers and minimising upfront costs. Established facilities and expertise already existed, but external recyclers had their own priorities. Would the company focus on marine plastic or opt for the easier-to-process, higher-value materials? And was it truly possible for Seven Clean Seas to maintain complete transparency and sustainability while outsourcing some of its key operations?

It wasn't just a logistical decision. The choice would define the organisation's very identity. Building its own system would place an unfathomable financial strain on the organisation, while relying on external partners risked losing control over how recovered plastic was managed. It became clear to Tom that whatever choice he made now would determine the future of Seven Clean Seas.

Scaling Growth without Sacrificing Values: The Financial Crossroads

While the financial dilemma weighed down on Tom, the operational problems were just as daunting. Seven Clean Seas has always followed a strategic approach to funding its existence through corporate sponsorships of plastic credits and donor contributions. This model enabled the organisation to remain free from investors who championed profitable business lines over those who strived for a social impact. As operations spread, the financial burden also increased. The existing funding sources were insufficient to drive the organisation's ambition to take out 10 million kilograms of ocean plastic by 2025.

Accepting external investment was now more viable than it had ever been. With the right amount of a significant infusion of capital, Seven Clean Seas could rapidly scale, build its own recycling plants, devise new innovations, and hire manpower to manage concessions and overcome logistical and technological barriers. Additionally, it would provide financial security to the organisation itself while buffering it from periodic financial funding issues.

But at what cost? Investors would always seek returns, and the organization would inevitably move toward a profit-driven model. In Tom's words, 'It's fair to say that I have strong views when it comes to building a sustainable business that drives environmental impact' *(Eco-Business, 2022)*.

Tom knew that investors' expectations and pressures could lead the company to make unsolicited shortcuts and compromises and conflict with its founding values as well.

This meant accepting retaining control and going through financial instability and slower growth

as the alternative. Corporate sponsorships and plastic credits, however, were unpredictable and unviable. Tom knew that the company's funding could run dry at any moment; there were challenges of economic downturns, shifting sustainability priorities, or donor fatigue.

Tom asked himself whether Seven Clean Seas should pursue scalability but compromise or opt for a steadier but more controlled approach. Seven Clean Seas witnessed the plastic crisis worsening by the day, and the decision could not be wrong.

The Community Equation: The True Cost of Fair Wages

In addition to the financial dilemma, Tom faced the weight of the heavily human challenge: those who had made Seven Clean Seas' mission possible.

From the beginning, Tom was dedicated to ensuring waste collectors and cleanup workers frequently ignored in the battle against plastic pollution were paid fairly. Waste picking had been an exploitative, minimally paid job for centuries, but it was an integral part of the recycling industry, especially in developing countries. However, Seven Clean Seas tried to change this, providing stable employment and fair pay to workers who collected plastic on beaches, just as surely as it sorted it to recycle.

Unfortunately, labour costs increased as the organisation grew. It became just another cleanup project, which required more and more workers, forcing greater financial strain. A hybrid model that offered full-time workers alongside volunteers or lower-wage labour to save money could be explored. However, this felt like a betrayal to Tom. The organisation had built itself on beating exploitative labour practices. Now, it was being forced to adopt the very system that it had set out to change.

Tom also explored the opportunities of forging government partnerships *(Seven Clean Seas. (n.d.))*. Fair wages could be sustained with public funding though this would come at the risk of bureaucratic red tape, political influence, and the fact that not all governments agreed on the same ethical labour standards.

It wasn't just that Tom hoped to get plastic out of the ocean; it was also to prove that conservation work didn't have to be unethical and entirely unsustainable. If Seven Clean Seas could not maintain financial viability and fair wages simultaneously, it risked undermining its own mission.

The Road Ahead: Scaling Impact While Ensuring Sustainability

The problems ahead weighed on Tom, who leaned back in his chair. Seven Clean Seas had grown massively by 2025, but now the organisation had to make a pivotal call in its quest to remove 10 million kilograms of plastic.

Tom knew that passion was not enough he also needed financial strength for this goal. While funding was a key component of the path forward, it was also crucial to have the right strategy. If the company did not scale quickly, it would not be able to raise a ton of money, but it would lose control. The future of recycling innovation was on the line beyond just its economics.

The key decision: Either spend a lot of money developing proprietary recycling technology with full quality and sustainability control or join up with an established recycler, gain their expertise but lose some control over environmental standards.

The human element could not be ignored in this decision, as Seven Clean Seas had always fought for fair wages for ocean waste workers so that those who protected the oceans were given dignity and respect. However, balancing this commitment with the company's financial stability became too difficult as costs increased. Could Seven Clean Seas develop a sustainable funding model whereby its mission was not compromised, but fair wages were still paid?

Tom knew this was not only about removing plastic from the ocean it was about preventing plastic from entering the ocean in the first place. While there was work to be done in cleanup, real change required systemic reform, corporate responsibility, and circular economy solutions in a post-consumer world.

Tom exhaled loudly. His decisions would define Seven Clean Seas and, by extension, ocean conservation as a whole. Would Seven Clean Seas lead the way for future sustainable waste management, establishing circular economy solutions? Or would financial constraints force the company to compromise its mission?

Tom glanced over the city skyline to the vast ocean past the city's lights. Plastic pollution was far from being defeated.

What came next? It was up to him to make that decision.

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Rajan Shah is a prolific case author and published over 450 cases till date. Over 6000 copies of his cases are sold from Case Centre, UK. His teaching interests lie in Banking and Financial Institutions, Financial Services, and Financial Derivatives.

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