



# NOOOO

## CASE STUDIES

### OCEAN SOLE

*Ocean Sole is an organisation that has transformed the litter that washes up on Kenya's shores into works of art. With the use of these works of art Ocean Sole both creates employment opportunities for local people in coastal and urban communities of Kenya, and reduces the amount of harmful and ugly litter that spoils the Kenyan coast. In their products Ocean Sole uses the thousands of rubber sandals that make their way through the waterways and up to the beaches of Kenya. The company has estimated that 400,000 recovered rubber sandals are used in their products every year and are sold worldwide. The profits from these products have fueled the creation of jobs for Kenyans as collectors, sorters, and artisans.*

# CONTEXT

Ocean Sole began in a coastal community at the border of Kenya and Somalia near the Kiunga Marine National Reserve. Julie Church, the company's founder, worked here with the Kenya Wildlife Service (KWS) and the World Wildlife Fund on a conservation and development project for sea turtles. In working in this community, she came across children making toys from rubber sandals, sticks and thorns. Wanting to inspire the community, educate them about the ocean and remove the marine litter that was impacting turtle nesting sites, she took the toys created by the local children and created a business.

In the beginning the business was small; local people created toys and beads made from the rubber sandals that wash up on the shores of Kenya, and they were then sold in craft fairs in Nairobi and around Kenya. Upon completing her work with KWS and WWF, the business continued as a hobby for Julie Church as she balanced her time between her research and selling what the community made from rubber sandals. However, Ocean Sole did not last simply as a hobby. Requiring her full attention, Julie Church was incorporated fully into quality control, marketing and supply chain aspects of the business.

In 2008 Ocean Sole was recreated formally with a team of around 10 people. This team included a woman that worked as a beader, using her expertise to create jewelry from the rubber sandals. An accomplished carpenter was also incorporated into the business, learning to use these rubber sandals as a medium instead of wood. Among the team were other artisans that learned how to create Ocean Sole's products from this new medium.

With the business Julie Church hoped to not only reach out to people in the coastal communities of Kenya, but to the masses as well. Using art and color, the company is now able to connect people all around the world to marine litter and conservation.

## Project Name

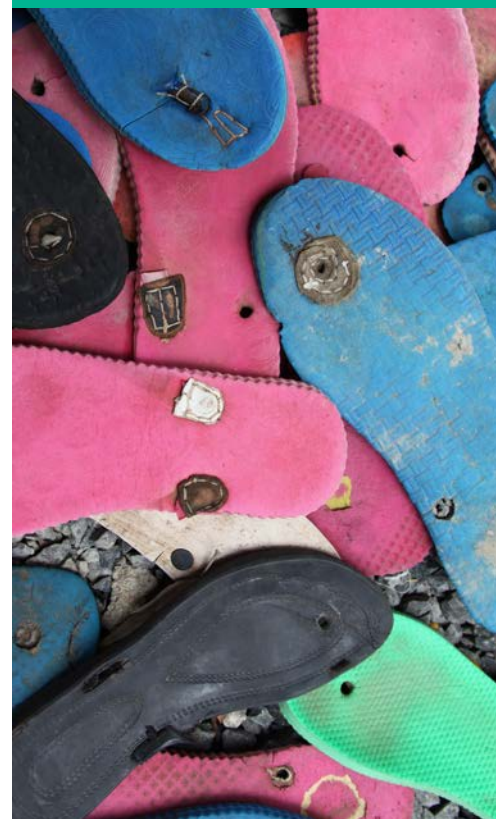
Ocean Sole

## Location

Nairobi, Kenya

## Concept

Ocean Sole is a recycling enterprise that turns marine litter into art. They use rubber sandals that wash up on the shores of Kenya to create many different items, including sculptures and beads, creating a market for used waste rubber.



# HOW DOES IT WORK?

Ocean Sole employs Kenyans, directly and informally, to collect rubber sandals on the coasts of Kenya and to transform them into bright and colorful art items; within the country, these are mainly marketed toward tourists and sold in gift shops, but they are also been sent to be exposed in metropolises, as Dubai and Singapore. A portion of Ocean Sole's proceeds support the activities of the Ocean Sole Foundation, which performs education and awareness raising activities for marine litter.

## Enterprises Key Points

Since its beginnings, Ocean Sole has transformed from a small side venture to a conservation and development project, to a full waste rubber recycling enterprise. Creating their own demand for this litter, the company has perfected their systems, creating a supply chain that runs from the coast to Nairobi. In this process Ocean Sole has created a number of jobs for Kenyan people. This is how the enterprise works:

### 1. Collection

Rubber sandals are collected from the many coastal areas of Kenya through a structured collection process, which involves incentivized informal dealers.

### 2. Cleaning and Creation

After having been cleaned, the rubber shoes are transformed into small and giant bright and colorful sculptures, or into beaded sandals. In addition to rubber, recycled plastic foam and glue are used to increase the quality of their art pieces.

### 3. Distribution of Products

Within Kenya, Ocean Sole's products are mainly marketed toward tourists and are sold in gift shops. This includes a shop owned by founder Julie Church called Marula Studios.

### 4. Employment

In Nairobi the company directly employs between 50 and 60 people (mostly carvers and bead makers), while informally employed are the dealers and part of the bead makers living on the coast.

In addition to the business aspects of Ocean Sole, the company has set up a not-for-profit foundation called the Ocean Sole Foundation. The foundation is separate from the company with some profits from the sale of products going toward its activities. With four key areas of intervention, the Ocean Sole Foundation aims to participate in marine conservation, marine education and research. At its core, the foundation looks to find trade based solutions from waste, especially through work with local communities.

Ocean Sole collects  
**400'000 rubber  
sandals** every  
year



Ocean Sole has been contracted to create a number of giant pieces for **Artspace Dubai** as well as the **S.E.A. Aquarium** in Singapore.



## The Story

One of the most unique aspects of this company is not their products, but their story. This story has been extremely important to the branding of the company as people all over the world can connect with inexpensive rubber sandals. Ocean Sole not only brings in an income from the waste that they transform, but provides extremely important information to its customer base about the ocean, marine litter and conservation.

The company has taken all steps possible to communicate marine litter issues to Kenyans, especially children and women, with the use of their products and the Ocean Sole Foundation. This connection to the people has allowed a network of Kenyans to find ways to improve their environment and resources they depend on, while making an income to sustain their families.

The role of art has been indispensable in communicating these problems with the general public. Using both these art pieces and their story Ocean Sole has been able to send a message in a sandal on behalf of the ocean to people all around the world.

## Results and progress

For this company, the most important next steps revolve around expansion. Although **Ocean Sole already collects nearly 400,000 rubber sandals for their products every year**, the company would like this number to increase. In order to do this, the company is continually improving and strengthening their own branding.

Moreover, Ocean Sole would like to create an active partnership with a company that manufactures the rubber sandals that they work with. This partnership would allow Ocean Sole to absorb a company's waste, thereby diverting waste rubber from a landfill. The company is also looking for partners that would like to create other products from waste rubber and marine litter.

Another activity that the company hopes to achieve is an elimination of their own waste. This would require the company to find a way to shred the rubber they use into much smaller pieces. Currently plastic shredders are a popular way to process recyclable materials, but because rubber sandals are not hard or rigid like plastics, they would not break in these machines. If this solution can be found, Ocean Sole would like to contribute this rubber to other projects such as road building and increasing the company's sustainability.



## The challenges

At least there are three different challenges that Ocean Sole attempts to tackle:

### 1. The costs

Many difficulties have emerged as a result of costs that arise from adding value to a waste product. The costs of materials, labor, marketing and the entire supply chain must be covered completely by the sale of the products that Ocean Sole creates. The company has overcome this in a number of ways including an overhaul of their systems to improve efficiency and quality control, as well as create branding and a story around their products. While improving production, Ocean Sole also brought an investor into the company; this has allowed Ocean Sole to become more self-reliant, now covering more costs through the sale of their products.

### 2. The production cycle

The process that it takes to transform these waste rubber sandals into a work of art involves manual and precise labor. Rubber can be constantly patched up with smaller pieces when a mistake is made, but it is difficult to keep products consistent when using this material. As the company tries to build up their brand, it is important that the quality, design and size of products remains the same across the board. Artisans must go through a long training process to keep these designs consistent when using such a malleable and difficult material.

### 3. Operations

It has taken several years for the company to perfect their structure and function of every step in production. In order to achieve a better system, the company has gone through constant trial and error. This trial and error has been another stressor, adding to the already high costs of producing art from waste. Since improving systems, these costs have lessened and Ocean Sole is instead able to focus on branding and story, rather than the quality of their production cycle.

## Sustainability

The aim of Ocean Sole as an enterprise is to be as sustainable as possible. The company has created a market for waste rubber that would not have existed without their efforts, while raising awareness about waste.

Ocean Sole also uses recycled plastic foam in their products, thereby diverting other types of waste from entering marine and terrestrial environments, as well as landfills. The company purchases defective foam pieces from their manufacturer. This plastic foam is often new and unused, but because of its shape would does not meet quality standards for use. These materials would simply be thrown away were it not for their use by Ocean Sole.

This company is very concerned with reusing their own waste, thereby creating a closed loop for the waste rubber marker they have created. Currently, left over scraps and pieces of rubber sandal that cannot be used in blocks and larger products are used to patch up sculptures, as well as make small parts. Some scrap materials have even been used to cushion the space under swings on playgrounds in Nairobi.



Global Partnership  
on Marine Litter

This case study was developed in collaboration with Ocean Sole. For More info on the Initiative, visit: [www.ocean-sole.com](http://www.ocean-sole.com).

Do you have an innovative initiative that contributes to preventing or reducing marine litter? Please visit [www.marinelitternetwork.org](http://www.marinelitternetwork.org) and share information or contact:

**Heidi Savelli**  
Programme Officer  
United Nations Environment Programme  
Email: [gpm1@unep.org](mailto:gpm1@unep.org)