Ever since the invention of plastic packaging, these slowly degrading and hazardous materials have been filtering into the environment, hampering the activity and health of flora and fauna.

The situation is particularly dire in the planet’s oceans, where plastics can be found in varying concentrations and sizes all over the world. In 2012, 165 million tons of plastic was estimated to have found its way into our oceans. By 2050, experts believe there will be a greater mass of plastic in the sea than there will be fish.

Images of enormous garbage patches larger than some countries are often used to illustrate the dire nature of the problem, while seabird carcasses are also depicted with their guts filled with plastic waste. However, the issue is also becoming a concern for humans, with around 11,000 pieces of microplastic ingested by seafood eaters each year and this may have ramifications for our general health and wellbeing.

While several initiatives and government organisations are proactive in seeking ways to address the growing issue of plastic pollution, it’s clear that nothing short of a radical technological breakthrough or systemic social change is likely to have a significant impact on this growing environmental disaster.

CREATING THE CHANGE
As a keen surfer and adventurer, Tim Silverwood became aware of the issue of plastic pollution in a direct sense. He’d always been aware of litter as a general problem, but one particular trip to Nepal made him realise the enormity of the issue. “I’d been chasing waves all around the world and the consistent thing I’d found was pollution,” Silverwood says. “But then on a trip to the Himalayas I had something of an epiphany when I realised all the waste from the tiny village I was staying in was being dumped over the side of the mountain.

“That waste was the same kind of garbage that would eventually find its way into the sea. The same garbage I’d been encountering while surfing my entire life.”

It was at this time that Silverwood began actively researching and discussing the problem. His life had taken a turn and he became driven to find a way to alleviate the issue of plastic pollution. Soon after, he met two other likeminded individuals in Amanda Marachel and Roberta Dixon-Valk and so the idea for Take 3 for the Sea was born.

“We each have our own story as to how and why we became engaged in this project, but it all boils down to the fact that each of us have a deep-seated love for the ocean,” Silverwood explains. “Anyone who loves the sea and has witnessed the scale of plastic pollution that’s out there would feel the same way.”

In ascertaining their skills and the potential impact they could make, the trio soon struck upon the idea of creating an awareness campaign that would engage the public and inspire them to take part in a solution. All it would take, they figured, would be to have an increasing number of people
removing just three pieces of rubbish any time they visited a wilderness area.

“Our thinking was that if we could get the ball rolling and encourage each person to share their experience on social media, then more and more people would be inspired to create the change.

“But Take 3 is also part of a larger vision. The initiative can be undertaken anywhere and by anyone, so it’s a global call to action designed to permeate via technology to all communities. However, we’re also active in going out to school groups, surf clubs and other community groups to actively educate them on what we’re trying to achieve,” Silverwood says.

A GROWING MOVEMENT

Although the team at Take 3 had the kernel of a positive idea when they banded together in 2009, Silverwood also admits that they may not have had a firm grasp on the financial stability of the business case from the outset and were therefore lucky to receive much needed support in the initiative’s early years.

“In 2011 we were honoured to receive our first grant through the Taronga Conservation Society to the tune of $50,000, and that was the moment that I realised this project was worth completely devoting myself to.”

Silverwood quit his job soon after and began planning a research and discovery voyage that would see him sailing 5,000 kilometres across the North Pacific Ocean to study the Great Pacific Garbage Patch. Upon his return, he found a platform in TEDx as a means of sharing his findings.

“TEDx gave us a new means for putting a spotlight on Take 3 for the Sea, which soon turned into an Australia-wide tour for encouraging grassroots activities, advocacy and activism while also gaining a greater amount of attention from the mainstream media,” he says.

The group’s uncanny ability to grow awareness for the initiative has resulted in several unexpected highlights for Silverwood, who recalls being gobsmacked by the reach of their campaign on more than one occasion.

“One time we received a call from Instagram’s headquarters. The people there explained how impressed they were in the way we were using their social media platform to get the word out, and they wanted to include us in a book they were publishing.

“Another big milestone arrived when we were invited by the US secretary of State, John Kerry to participate in a conference in Washington DC, which happened in 2016. Every now and then a moment like this occurs that makes you think ‘Wow, our reach is much greater than we’d imagined.’

SAVING THE OCEANS: A SOCIAL ENTERPRISE

Take 3 for the Sea is an exceedingly simple concept at its core. Collect three pieces of rubbish as you leave that watery, beach or forest and you leave the world a better place. It’s an activity that Silverwood describes as a ‘micro-clean-up’.

“By encouraging people to take on this behaviour and share the message with their social networks, Take 3 for the Sea becomes something of a Trojan Horse for a better, more environmental way of thinking.

“Anyone who takes part in Take 3 for the Sea is taking the first step on the long road to a sustainable future – those same people are then less likely to litter, more like to say no to plastic bags and they’ll also begin encouraging their friends to do the same.”

And that ultra-modern concept of ‘virality’ in social behaviours is integral to Take 3 becoming a truly impactful initiative. After all, the group ultimately needs to have millions of people partaking in order to put a dent into the amount of waste materials flowing into the world’s oceans.

In that sense, Take 3 joins a number of other environmental awareness campaigns all vying for the attention of outdoor enthusiasts, and we asked Silverwood about how he sees his project fitting in with the likes of Leave No Trace.

As far as he’s concerned, there’s no reason why they shouldn’t all be able to work together towards the same goals.

“Take 3 dovetails perfectly with Leave No Trace as in some ways it’s all one and the same,” he explains. “However, our message goes one step further than the traditional Leave No Trace message because we’re encouraging people to proactively remove waste from the environment.

“It’s an horrific thought that someone has gone into a special place and left something behind – but what do we do about it? We want to encourage everyone to be the change, to go and solve the problem and be a bigger person than those creating or ignoring the issue.”

And so far, the message seems to be sticking. As a primarily social enterprise, the team at Take 3 currently measure their success by the reach and engagement they enjoy on social media platforms. It is here that Silverwood sees the direct impacts of the concept he helped create.

“We currently have 100,000 followers across Instagram and Facebook channels and there have been more than 35,000 unique usages of our #take3forthesea tag on Instagram,” he says. “But we also want to get to the point where we have some sort of technology that helps actually calculate the amount of rubbish being removed as a direct result of our campaign and we’ve already begun experimenting in this direction.”

Recently, Take 3 invited its followers to photograph and share the rubbish they were removing whenever they went out to their favourite outdoor spot. The pilot project saw 1700 people getting involved, and Take 3 partnered with Macquarie University to help analyse the results.

“We found that people were actually collecting around 23 pieces of rubbish on average, but the results could also be used to tell us more about what types of people were active and where they were doing their micro-cleanups.

“Soon, we’ll be able to attribute a precise dollar figure for every x amount of rubbish removed from the environment and that becomes extremely powerful when seeking future funding.”

As Silverwood and his team continue to innovate to combine social media with socially-responsible activities, it’s comforting to realise that the fundamentals continue to apply, that even a seemingly insurmountable problem can begin to be addressed by a few people making small changes.

“It’s still the case that small changes can motivate a large-scale movement and that will create the broad-scale changes that we need.”

Learn more about Take 3 for the Sea via the group’s website at take3.org or follow them on Facebook @take3forthesea.