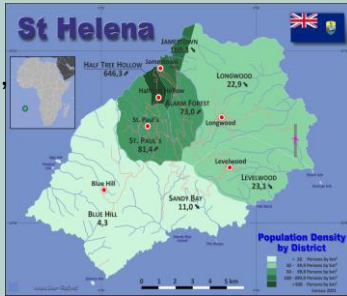


Community-led project, reducing the cross-cutting impacts of plastic pollution on wildlife and people in St Helena

Overview

St Helena Island hosts 3987 residents, and its Marine Protected Area teems with wildlife, including whale sharks, hammerheads, seabirds, turtle nesting populations. Its land mass is also home to endemic plants and invertebrates found nowhere else on earth.



Credit – Maria Fernandes

"I am grateful our plastic waste is not as significant as other parts of the world, but as a small geographically isolated island we need the education and awareness of how plastics impact our health and the health of our marine creatures" – Helena Bennett, Director, St Helena National Trust (SHNT)

The plastic problem

A significant amount of plastic pollution is washing up from elsewhere, due to St Helena's location as a geographically isolated, oceanic island in the South Atlantic Ocean.

Lack of a strong global plastics recycling market means it is not economically viable to send plastic waste to overseas recyclers, and it instead stays on island and enters St Helena's landfill, which is fast reaching capacity.

Food, drink and other goods are imported in single-use plastic packaging, with some common items being littered on island.

Plastic is often cheaper, more easily available, and convenient to use than alternative materials on island. With **high living costs** and **low wages**, retailers and consumers cannot currently afford higher-cost non-plastic alternatives.

Key successes

A Materials Recycling Facility was developed to compact and bale recyclable waste, including plastics, which have been baled for reuse as 'Lego' bricks, to support infrastructure and maximise capacity within the landfill site.

Sources of international plastic litter have been identified through the application of robust, scientific shoreline monitoring strategies. **1166** plastic bottles and lids were recorded in a 6-month period **from international sources**, with MEKO Pure Water, NONGFU Spring, Fontana, and Coca-Cola being the most common brands.

Equitable and inclusive community engagement is ensuring all community groups, especially those typically excluded, are engaged and will feed into the design of pilot interventions for reducing plastic pollution on St Helena in 2024.

A UKOTs plastic pollution network has been established this year, with representation from 15 territories, sharing knowledge and best practices for overcoming barriers to tackling plastic pollution.

Recommendations for the Plastics Treaty

1. Voices from the UKOTs urgently need to feed into the treaty negotiations.
2. Biodiversity must not be considered an afterthought – more partnerships across the UKOTs are required to build robust, scientific evidence of biodiversity impacts and effective mitigation approaches.
3. A reduction in plastic production must be prioritised to reduce impacts of imported plastic goods on island.
4. Locally appropriate solutions must be funded equitably and respond to unique challenges of diverse island contexts.
5. A global market is required for recycled plastics to enable islands to move away from landfills and incinerators.
6. The Global North must take responsibility for their role in driving disproportionate impacts of plastic pollution in the Global South. Polluting organisations must be held accountable and accelerate implementation of commitments.

Local impact of plastic pollution

Marine and coastal environments: St Helena's coastline suffered pervasive impacts following the 2017 Durban spill of microplastic nurdles, many of which are still washing up today. 71 shoreline surveys have been conducted between May – September 2023, resulting in **16,547** items collected of which **89%** were plastic items.

Biodiversity: Both microfibres and macro-plastics have been found in whale shark feeding grounds around St Helena.

Plastic imports and disposal: The Waste Management Services have invested in a plastic baling machine. However, the international market for recycled plastics is not currently profitable, therefore St Helena cannot afford to export their plastic waste overseas. Despite their efforts to recycle, plastic waste ultimately ends up in the landfill – which is fast reaching its capacity.

Future project ambitions

Facilitate inclusive workshops with the community to validate our understanding of their plastic challenges.

Co-design pilot interventions informed by evidence and create sustainable, community-led solutions, which sit at the intersection of environmental health and social justice.

Further monitoring of wildlife ingestion of microplastics will be carried out in 2024, with a focus on St Helena's endemic butterfly fish and Atlantic chub mackerel.

Continue shoreline sampling in St Helena to characterise litter composition and identify plastic hotspot sites.

Develop and consult on local policy for reducing single-use plastic usage in St Helena by March 2025.

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"We needed the intervention to tackle local plastic pollution but also to look for long term solutions to combat the pollution that is being washed up on our shoreline from external sources. With a land mass of 47 square miles, the day will come where we are no longer be able to manage this waste"

Helena Bennett, Director, St Helena National Trust (SHNT)



Credit: Matthew Owen

Lessons learnt

Key lessons:

- **Standardised monitoring approaches** must be adopted to ensure comparison across global databases.
- **Mapping local actors** and planning **inclusive engagement** from project launch has been key.
- Understanding **local dynamics** and reality is important for designing projects in UKOTs.
- Applying **Free Prior Informed Consent (FPIC)** throughout all stages of the project cycle was positively received by the community.
- Conducting **different forms of outreach** and engagement has been effective, including beach clean events, marine-themed festivals, social media, and local news outlets.
- **Policy must be designed equitably** and consider local agendas and priorities.

Challenges:

- **Conflicting public perceptions of tap water on island means high usage of plastic bottled water.** This presents a barrier to encouraging a refill behaviour or introducing public fountains. At present, **350,000** single-use plastic water bottles are imported on average each year to St Helena.
- **Retailers want to transition to a single-use plastic-free island**, however, the costs of reusable and non-plastic alternative products still prove to be a barrier for them.