

Interview No-Trash Triangle Initiative 2022 - Star

Moderator: And we jump again to Indonesia, where the G20 just met. 5 to 12 million tons of plastic end up in the ocean every year, and Indonesia is particularly affected. Time and again, there are startups that claim to have found the solution to fishing all this trash out of the sea again. Only that's not actually possible, says our guest today, Jens Hamprecht. It has to do with the star that Jens Hamprecht is committed to protecting the world's oceans and with a touching story he told my colleague today, Laura Szabo. Together with local women entrepreneurs and marine biologists, he founded an NGO in Indonesia that collects plastic waste from the sea. And he explains how we should tackle the plastic problem in general so that what so many are predicting doesn't happen, namely that by 2050 there will be more plastic in the oceans than fish.

Interviewer: Hello Mr. Hamprecht, glad it worked out.

Jens Hamprecht: With pleasure.

Interviewer: It's a very impressive story, and it also has a bit to do with the star. How did your commitment to the sea come about in the first place?

Jens Hamprecht: The star for the project now goes back to an article in Stern. It mentioned the problem of plastic waste in Indonesia, and in particular the article mentioned the concept of a German engineer, Dirk Lindenau, who has developed a concept for collecting plastic waste on a ship and recycling this waste on the ship. I then wanted to meet Mr. Lindenau. I met him for the first time in Kiel. He presented the concept to me. I was enthusiastic and agreed with him that I would support him in implementing it. However, we only had a little time because a few weeks after our first meeting it turned out that he was seriously ill with cancer. In the following months we had many working meetings and together with his friends I submitted his main ideas to the patent office in Munich. And the day of his death fell on the day of the feedback from Munich.

I had promised him to continue the concept. But that was easier said than done. In the years that followed, there was never any concrete feedback from government agencies:

Yes, that's exactly what we want to implement. And I had thus deepened the dialogue with marine biologists, especially Christian Lott. Miriam Weber from Germany. And from them I learned that there are so many islands in Indonesia that are still so small, where such a ship would be so big as a first step. And together with them, I then pulled up the project that we run today, the No-Trash Triangle Initiative, but they had already formed in advance. Through our cooperation, we now managed to significantly increase the volumes in this project.

Interviewer: And how exactly are these projects now trying to tackle plastic waste in the sea?

Jens Hamprecht: If you have an ocean beach in mind, there are already people today who are really specifically looking for the PET bottles. But the beach looks the same afterwards as it did before. That means what you really need are approaches to finance the entire plastic waste collection. And this is where the startup CleanHub from Berlin has supported us significantly, because it finances the collection of all those plastic wastes for us that are not recyclable today. The plastic bottles, there has always been the market for them. It's just a matter of collecting the sum of the waste.

Interviewer: If we start talking about plastic waste, what is the status quo in 2022? In terms of ocean pollution, where are we right now in terms of quantities?

Jens Hamprecht: We have about 8 million tons of plastic waste entering the sea every year. We have the well-known forecast that there will be more plastic waste than fish in the sea in 2050, and that urgently requires the development of waste infrastructure. And the critical question is: Who will finance it? We cannot leave the developing countries to finance it on their own. A very important approach to solving this problem is what is known in Germany as the Green Dot. This means that those who bring waste into circulation pay a levy to finance the waste collection and recycling infrastructure. The essential point is just this: firstly, enough money must be collected from the distributors and secondly, this money must also be available to all recycling technologies. We already have a very important recycling infrastructure today, especially in Europe. But we also need to expand it to include new technologies. And they need support from these Green Dot systems.

Interviewer: Where does the plastic waste come from? Exactly? So what are the problem areas that we have at the moment?

Jens Hamprecht: It continues to be disposable packaging, followed by textiles. These are the biggest generators of waste in the sea. That means for us in consequence, we have to ask ourselves critically the question Where do we really need single-use plastics? There are the applications, be it the masks in the medical field, the food packaging, that cause there to be less food waste. Yes, we should continue to use them. But basically ask the question: Where do we need single-use packaging?

Interviewer: So that basically means that we have to start at the source. If I understand this correctly.

Jens Hamprecht: That's exactly it. I completely agree with that. Imagine if the water overflows in the bathtub. The first thing you do is you go to the source and there are some approaches to collect plastic waste in the vastness of the ocean. But that was also an essential learning for me to get there first, to collect that - you're expending such huge amounts of energy and the waste is so dispersed in the vastness of the ocean that if you have \$1,000 in your hand, that \$1,000 is really best invested collecting at the source.

Interviewer: Now the topic is actually already relatively present in Germany. There are reusable coffee cups, we use jute bags instead of plastic bags. But in your opinion, has there really been a rethink? Plastic waste in Germany is still increasing. I think we've just reached the 6 million tons of plastic waste we produce every year. How can we change that?

Jens Hamprecht: The total amount of plastic is not the problem. The plastic is not the problem. The question is: What do we do with it? If you take the automotive sector or houses, we will even need more plastics in the future, whether for insulation or to enable mobility. But we have to significantly increase our recycling rates. On paper, Europe recycles 30%. But if you ask what proportion of new plastic products in Europe is based on recycled material today, the figure is just 6%. And in food packaging, for example, we can use non-recycled materials. Due to food legislation and here it is important that we also use new recycling technologies, which is then the so-called

chemical recycling. This makes it possible that these products can also be manufactured on the basis of recycle.

Interviewer: What do you think needs to change politically?

Jens Hamprecht: We need acceptance of all recycling technologies. That is an essential point. We need ambitious targets; it helps if politicians set ambitious targets. But the policy must then also leave the degrees of freedom as to which recycling technology is used to achieve this goal. It also helps, as the EU has decided, to impose punitive tariffs on plastic waste that is not recycled. But it doesn't help if, in the end, only the taxpayer pays for the fact that Germany has not recycled some waste. But if the taxes are borne by the disposal companies, then they also have an incentive - an opportunity - to invest in new recycling infrastructure.

Interviewer: We also always like to berate the countries that, in our eyes, don't have a proper disposal system and don't handle their waste properly either. What role does Germany play in this system from your point of view? Because we already export a relatively large amount of waste to these countries, don't we?

Jens Hamprecht: We were definitely a pioneer with the Green Dot concept. Today, we are no longer. If you look in Europe alone, Italy collects and recycles significantly more biowaste separately. We have a rapid increase in the amount of plastic recycled in Italy, while in Germany we have almost stagnated in recent years. This means that an investment push is needed, and for this the industry needs the certainty that its recycling technologies will be accepted. And high fees for incinerating plastic waste to generate electricity will help. Because the higher the financial cost of incinerating plastics in residual waste, the more attractive recycling becomes.

Interviewer: If we now look away from Germany again, we can also look to Indonesia - your area of operation. In the stern. article 2018, marine biologist Mareike Huhn told us that it is very, very difficult to change these old practices in countries like Indonesia. There, garbage has simply been disposed of in the sea. That was the custom. Since the advent of plastic, of course, this has become a huge problem. How do you perceive this now? After these years, a new way of thinking has developed.

Jens Hamprecht: The essential key for us is that we have set up this project under the leadership of local entrepreneurs. These are people who spend their professional lives bringing new ideas to the market, changing behavior patterns, but who are themselves deeply rooted in their society. This is exactly the spirit we need: an entrepreneurial spirit, but an anchoring in the local society that we as Europeans cannot deliver at all. Our task is therefore to support these local entrepreneurs, whether with networks, knowledge or technology, so that they can implement their recycling and collection projects.

Interviewer: There are always startups that take a different approach, that give the impression that the problem is somehow under control. One of the best known is The Ocean Clean Up by the Dutchman Boyan Slade. Some people from Silicon Valley have also invested there, and just a few days ago they promised to fish all the garbage out of the ocean. What do you think of these projects now that you've been involved with them for so many years? So is it even possible to fish all the plastic out of the sea again?

Jens Hamprecht: No, not in purely physical terms. After three months, at the latest, most of the plastic waste sinks to the bottom of the ocean. That means over the total area of the ocean, they always have only a fraction of the waste distributed over a huge area. If you want to get at all the plastic waste, it is significantly more efficient, they go to the source. What that means in concrete terms is that a river barrier makes a lot more sense than collecting in the open ocean. And collecting in households is again much more sensible than the river barrier.

Interviewer: But what happens to the garbage that's already there, so to speak, that's already floating around in the sea? How do we get it out again or does it just stay there?

Jens Hamprecht: The essential question is: how do we avoid adding more? Just by the fact that within a maximum of twelve weeks the plastic waste sinks down to the seabed, we realistically have no chance of siphoning off what's out there in significant quantities. There's going to be algae and shell growth on the plastic shortly; it's sinking and that's why we actually have to go to the source. That's expensive, but there's no way around building that infrastructure.

Interviewer: We have heard from you before: o 8 million tons per year end up in the sea annually. I think these estimates always range somewhere between five and 13 million. The NGO that you're involved with now collects 100 tons of plastic a year. Is that right, that number?

Jens Hamprecht: This year we will reach about 200 tons. Yes, we are in that order of magnitude this year.

Interviewer: Which is a really great figure. But if you listen to it in comparison, you can see what a Sisyphean task it actually is to somehow get rid of this garbage. What helps you not to despair about these numbers, these immense numbers, and to continue somehow?

Jens Hamprecht: It helps to know that we have the support of local entrepreneurs. Just as it is possible to set up restaurant chains in Indonesia or to build up shopping centers that belong to a parent company. In the same way, we are convinced that we will succeed in setting up other project areas beyond this first one. Because that is exactly the approach of local entrepreneurs. If a business works locally, then it will be expanded.

Interviewer: At this point, I can wish you continued success. Thank you very much for the interview. That was a very exciting insight. Thank you!