



“If Oceans Could Speak”

Episode #2 Transcript

Lefteris Arapakis: building solutions together with the fishers

[00:00:00] **Lefteris:** And since, you know, the most common from plastic is fishing gear, we decided to start working with the fishing communities to prevent that phenomenon of happening. So now all of these fishermen, they're more than 1,500 at the moment, they give to us, their old fishing equipment to prevent it from entering the sea and becoming ghost gear.

[00:00:21] **Jen:** Hello. And welcome to another episode of if oceans could speak the podcast that listens to the oceans, through the personal stories of those who share their life with the sea around them. As always Stefan and I are going to be chatting to the people behind these unique stories in the hope that our conversations not only intrigue but inspire you to reflect upon your own individual connection to the Ocean.

[00:00:44] **Stefan:** In the second season of if oceans could speak, we're focusing on perspectives from the Mediterranean sea. And today we are delighted to discuss the role of social inclusion for a sustainable Mediterranean. We have with us today, Lefteris Arapakis, co-founder of Enaleia, the first professional fishing school in Greece that has evolved to work with fishing communities to clean up plastic from the sea and to integrate these plastics back into the circular economy.

Lefteris is also the 2021 UNEP-MAP ambassador of the Mediterranean coast. Welcome to if oceans could speak, Lefteris.

[00:01:19] **Lefteris:** Thank you very much, Stefan for the introduction. Really nice to be here and have this discussion with you.

[00:01:24] **Jen:** Yeah. I'm excited to chat more about your work Lefteris. I was wondering if you could tell us a little bit more about your Mediterranean sea story. What inspired your love for the ocean in the beginning?





[00:01:36] **Lefteris:** That's a very nice question. So actually everything started around five and a half years ago. So back then Greece was in the peak of the economic crisis that we are facing over here. And I really had the urge that I wanted to do something to help, and I wanted to do something to fight unemployment.

So I'm coming from a long line of professional fishermen. Like my family that have been professionally fishing for five generations. And I'm the first one that actually I broke the cycle and I didn't follow the profession. So anyway, one day I was just discussing with my father and he was complaining, I think, like a typical fisherman that they couldn't find enough personnel for the fishing boats.

So on that day, I'm like, okay, let's go to a fishing school and get some, some people for the boat. And we realized there's no fishing school in Greece. So I told that to a friend of mine and we started, and we have trained more than 130 unemployed people and created around a hundred jobs in the country. But the point is I had no idea about fishing.

No, like I studied economics. So yeah, probably the worst fisherman in Greece, even. So when we were creating the curriculum for the fishing school, we went to the sea. We started fishing with all kind of fishing boats to see the whole process. And it was then that we're fishing in these islands, you know, these these beautiful Greek islands, the middle of the Aegean Sea with the white and blue houses.

So back then, I was really shocked to see that the, the fishermen, when they pulled out their nets, they collected not only fish, but also plastic, like a lot. And I still remember the first catch we got like this soda can that was so old it had expired back in 1987. So it was like 30 years in the sea and I'm holding that and then the fisherman takes it from my hand and throws it back in the sea. And he says, you know, all of this, all this marine litter, it's, it's not our problem. But over the next days, we, we, we fished from the sea, like numerous plastic bottles plastic bags fishing nets, even a refrigerator and, and the fishermen, they were just throwing it back to the sea, you know?

So then we started reading all the latest papers about my plastic pollution. And then we saw that, you know, by 2050, there would be more plastic than fish in the sea. So we realized there's no use getting there more fishermen if we don't do





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something about that. So we decided to act, and we started the small pilot from our local port here in Piraeus just with my father, some of his friends we told them, just bring the plastic, you collect your nets back to the land.

And it worked and they started collecting vast amounts of plastic. And then we saw that a lot of this plastic is not coming only from Greece, but from other Mediterranean countries as well. We got like beer cans from Turkey, plastic bottles from Egypt we got like TVs from Spain and some radio stations from Italy.

So we realized that in our case, you know, Marine plastic pollution is not like a national challenge, but rather a Mediterranean challenge. And this is why we created a new project and we named it the Mediterranean Clean Up. And through that project, we are training fishing communities to fish for plastic. So over the last two and a half years, we have mobilized more than 34 fishing communities, all over Greece and in the Northern parts of Italy.

And currently they're collecting plastic from, from the sea. Currently they're collecting more than 5,000 kilo of plastic weekly to give you the better understanding is like we are filling in two trucks, full of plastic bottles from the sea daily. So, this is how it looks like. And then something weird happened.

We showed that the most common plastic waste we find in the Mediterranean - I dunno if, if it's the same also in the Arctic circle - but here it's lost fishing equipment that this is around 20% of, of what we collect. And the problem we have with the fishing nets is not only to take like 600 years to break down to microplastics with all these hazardous effects they have, but for all of this period of time, they keep on fishing, you know, they are nets. So they keep on killing, like fish, turtles, seals, anything you can imagine. So all the time we collect them from, from the sea, it's like full of skeletons. So we realized that there's no use you know, fighting just the symptoms of, of marine plastic pollution, which is collecting the plastic but we should go also deeper.

And since, you know, the most common from plastic is fishing gear, we decided to start working with the fishing communities to prevent that phenomenon of happening. So now all of these fishermen, they're more than 1,500 at the moment they give to us their old fishing equipment to prevent it from entering





the becoming ghost gear and we are collecting tonnes and tonne, and tonnes of material.

So yeah, pretty much is how it started. And then we, we came to the cross road of, you know, what's going to happen with all that material now with all that plastic. So gradually we developed partnerships with certified recycling companies and now in each port that we're operating, there's a container and, and the fisherman put the plastic inside the container and they put the fishing net in some big box close to the container.

So once that facility is full, it goes to some sorting facility and there that material is sorted. And we have currently three recycling and up cycling channels. So the first one has to do with the plastic bottles. So the plastic bottles are sent to a fashion company in Madrid and they up-cycle it into, into t-shirts and shoes and backpacks. And the fishing nets are sent to an environmental organization in the Netherlands called healthy seas, and they facilitate the up-cycling of the nets into new products, such as socks or swimming pants and the rest, the mixed plastic, well currently we are sending it to a recycling factory In Athens. These guys, they turn plastic into pellets, little balls of plastic, and then these pellets, then they can be melted and they can create new products such as surfboards or furniture.

So around 70% of what's collected from the sea is turned into new products. So it's entering the circular economy. So this is why also the United nations gave us this awards last year. So, this is how the story with the sea started.

[00:08:28] **Jen:** it's a great initiative and such a good achievement. You've really thought of every aspect of the plastic pollution!

[00:08:34] **Stefan:** Yeah, that's really excellent. And I really like the fact that something organic grew from your own experiences in the region. Did you ever imagine that you would be working for an environmental cause as well as the social one? Also given how the jobs are connected to this.

[00:08:50] **Lefteris:** To be honest, Stefan, no, I, I, I never imagined that. Like, if someone told me that five years ago, where do you imagine yourself? I, I wouldnt have thought that, but it's something that comes by step by step approach. Like. These kind of solutions. I believe they come by working with,





with the local communities. Like I had no idea that, you know, they were collecting so much plastic and they didn't seem to consider it a problem cause they were not educated on that.

So, you know, sometimes I think the best kind of, of social innovation comes from working on the field, working with the communities and just listening to their needs.

[00:09:31] **Jen:** It sounds like it took you going into the fishing community and seeing plastic and sort of opening their eyes to it. Maybe they just got used to seeing so much plastic come up in their nets that they didn't really know what to do about it, or see that it was their responsibility or they could do anything to change. And maybe you coming in and seeing how widespread this problem is that kind of sparked the change. And I wondered, was it easy to get the fishing communities on board? What sort of attitudes did you, did you encounter in the beginning?

[00:10:04] **Lefteris:** Yeah, that's nice question.

No it hasn't been too easy to work with them. But it, it truly helped that I'm also coming from a, from a fishing family, you know, so they knew my father and my grand, my grandfather, my, my brothers. So they knew that I want to work with them. I want to collaborate with them. I don't want to take advantage of them.

So that really helped, you know, gain that. Initial level of trust that allowed me to talk with everybody. But then I think the, the, the way that we, we build these collaborations with these fishing communities was through creating trust. So let's say if I told them that, you know, next week, there will be a container here for the plastic they collect this week, the container should be there otherwise the, the trust will be violated. And that really helped. And another thing that actually helped is adapting to the pandemic, to be honest. So when, when we started the lockdown, like two years ago, we couldn't travel to the, the fishing port anymore. So then what we did is I started discussing with the fishermen and asking for feedback, you know, back then we were working with uh, three or four port, something like that.

So I was asking for feedback on what we can do better, you know, in our collaboration. And they told me something fascinating. They told me like, you





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know, you don't have to, to come to the port all the time and, and talk to us and, and deal with all these little micro challenges that, that come to the field.

You know, why, why don't you get some people from the local communities here that they know us and we trust them and, you know, they can take care of the day to day. So we did that and we invested in that and we got some people from the local community as part-time employees and in some places with not so many fishermen as volunteers and the plastic we were collecting started to, you know, scale up because there were no little minor challenges blocking the path.

Cause you know, decisions were made in a local level. So everything became faster and that allowed us. From within a year, actually from three to four ports to go to over 30 ports. And you know, from just around Athens to work all over Greece, north Italy, and lately we start also working in Kenya. So we work also with the fishing communities in Kenya coast, in, Kwale and with local organizations like power association and Kwale recycling center, and we're able to perform what we tried here in Greece there. So 400 fishers men and women stop their fishing activities in Kenya, and they go with their boats to collect plastic from isolated parts of the coastline. And then this plastic they give it to recycling centers and get compensated for that. So that allows them, you know, to, to earn a better living better than, than fishing to be honest.

[00:13:07] **Jen:** That was going to be my question is what what benefits do the Fisher fishing communities get from, from, from collecting this plastic? But I guess there's an incentive. They are compensated with that.

[00:13:19] **Lefteris:** in Kenya, that's in Kenya. In Kenya we believe that that would be a very strong solution because what the fisherman told me there is that every year to collect less fish and more plastic, and they're really struggling financially. So if you find ways that allows them, you know, to increase their income and clean their seas I think it's a great way of social inclusion. Because you create like win-win collaborations between human societies and nature, you know collaborations that both of them are, are actually benefitting. In Greece, they, they get small financial benefits to participate in the project but not a lot. It's it's like, you know, their, their coffees for the month or something like that. So in Greece and in the, Mediterranean actually their, their main motivation to work with us it's first one cleaning the sea. Like most of them are aware, now that plastic is challenge to the Mediterranean and most of them, you know, love





the sea because they, they live from the sea and they live their families from the sea.

So they see the results. And the second one is actually, it's kind of weird, but it's positive storytelling. So it's like, including them in interviews and media, local international and national media sometimes advertisements and stuff. So they really like it because they can show, you know, to their friends, community, et cetera, that, you know, they, they're not only fishing, but they're also taking care of the sea and we had, like, let's say some interviews with BBC documentaries and the fishers didn't really care so much, but when we go the local newspaper people read, they got super excited to participate in interview and that really helped the whole project.

[00:15:12] **Stefan:** That's a great evolution in such a short timeframe to expand so much and to actually connect to the communities. It's really great to see. You mentioned also the logistics involved in that with the tons of plastics collected every day. Do you still have the same objectives as when you started, or how do you see the evolution of your project in the future? What's the next step?

[00:15:35] **Lefteris:** The next step would be to reduce drastically the plastic within the Mediterranean. So that means that, you know, our solution is not so much needed anymore. And already we have hundreds of fishermen over Greece declaring that they collect less, less plastic from the same spot. So it seems to be working in a way, you know, at least a fishing fields would be more clean. So that's the first thing, like making sure that the solution is, is working and secondly, to replicate that solution in other parts of the planet with a strong fishing communities and strong marine plastic pollution, and also recycling facilities.

So like, Kenya was a perfect example, but also some other solutions can be implemented also in other Mediterranean countries and also south Southeast Asia countries. So would love to work with the fishing and recycling communities in those areas. And the last is maybe also one of the most important activities that we do, but it's also not as exciting as fishing plastic from the sea. So the last is having advocacy campaigns. So it's pushing decision makers in government and international organizations to actually take action for our seas and for Marine plastic pollution and for circular economy. And that's why we participate in the, in the COPs. And we even have a memorandum of understanding with with the Greek government and give them for free data on





the plastic we collect you know, to, to make better, better laws actually on, on reducing Marine plastic pollution. And, and the great example of that is that a couple of months ago at UNEA in Nairobi, 175 countries, and from the first time, including United States, they have signed an agreement to end plastic pollution. So that's a huge thing. It's maybe the biggest treaty we have for a specific challenge since the 1989 Canada for the ozone layer. So now we have a roadmap and we have solutions to implement, and hopefully the governments will start investing more in circular economy and less in single use plastic. And maybe we'll be able to fight this problem after all.

[00:17:50] **Jen:** That's really great that you're aware of these two different approaches coming from the bottom up, the social inclusion idea. And, but also this top down, getting the governments and holding them accountable to, to this problem and, and hopefully moving to a cleaner ocean. I wanted to go back to the people involved in the, in the fishing school that you started, because fishing is one of the oldest connections that we have to the sea. And, and I wondered if the people that you're bringing in to the fishing communities has their awareness changed, has their connection to the ocean changed and. Do you think it's brought about behavior change in these people that you're you're teaching and training?

[00:18:28] **Lefteris:** Yeah. I, I definitely see changes from the older generations. To be honest, we focus on sustain in terms of, you know, not just fishing less, but also earning more money while fishing less. So a technique that we are training a lot about is fishing tourism. So now we don't only focus so much on, on new fishermen, but also we work a lot with the existing fishing communities and and we train them on these techniques and we have trained more than 300 professional fishers on, on fishing tourism. And that's that became legal in Greece in 2016. So what is that? In case you arrive in Greece. It's like you can get on a boat, a fishing boat traditional fishing boat in an island. And then you can go around the island and fishing at the same time. You can even do catch the fish, or you can do catch and release.

So if you decide to catch the fish, the fisherman is cooking the fish for you and you have like this authentic experience. It's, it's actually really nice. I've done it many times myself and we train many fishermen that, but the point is that through that experience, the fishermen earn more money. And from collecting like a hundred kilos of fish a day, just collect like three kilos of fish.





And at the same time, when they see dolphins or turtles or seals that used to be their enemies, now they are excited to find them because they get the bigger tip from from the tourists. Like, you know, this dolphin spotting projects, but with fishermen. So we are really trying, you know, to make them part of the solution and take them away from being part of the problem.

[00:20:10] **Jen:** That's really great. I had didn't think about fishing tourism actually when we were preparing for this chat. So that's sort of really nice addition, actually. And what about the, the sort of older generation of fishers? I guess they have a wealth of knowledge that you can take from, have they imparted that wisdom to you or are they, are they open to learning new things about marine life?

[00:20:32] **Lefteris:** In a way. Yeah, surprisingly enough. Yeah. so they're both willing to give that knowledge to younger people, but in many times also these guys are also really open minded. Like sometimes more open mind than younger generations of fishermen. So they're willing to learn new stuff and they're willing to implement new activities. Again, I'm not speaking about all of them, but it's a significant percentage that then pushes the rest to also adopt the same kinda opportunities. If you provide them, you know, with an added value, say they're willing to work with you.

[00:21:07] **Stefan:** And that added value that you mentioned, of course the fishing industry is hugely important, not just in Greece but in many countries, but for coastal communities around the world, of course. Do you see benefits of this social inclusion that your organization's practicing also for the sustainable development on the local level, on the regional level?

[00:21:28] **Lefteris:** Yeah. I believe that the main reason we are working so closely with them and the main reason that allows, allowed us to scale so quickly is exactly that social inclusion it's exactly that trust building and, and engaging them into, into the solution. And actually the name of Enaleia, our organization means together with the fishermen. So we really try, you know, to work with them. We don't want to, to stand out like we are the ones that are, you know, cleaning the sea, helping everybody, no. What, what we're saying is what we are doing with the fishing communities of the Mediterranean.



And, and they feel that, and then or with the fishing communities you know, they get ownership of the project. They get they get ownership about, about doing that. So, you know, trust makes everything so much faster.

[00:22:18] **Stefan:** And I think that's also a lesson that we can take to other parts of the world to other sectors. Can you think of other sectors maybe in Greece or elsewhere, this model of merging the social development and so forth, or the generation of new jobs, basically how they can go hand in hand with environmental causes? Is this is something that can be replicated?

[00:22:38] **Lefteris:** Yeah. Well, I believe it can be replicated. We are replicating ourselves, you know, in other parts of the world. So, I think the most important thing is try to include the local community you want to work with, try to provide the solution that is of value to them and to determine what you is of value to them need first to ask them. So that's, that's really important. Like go to the field, ask them, you know, what can do for you? What, what are the problems here? And then you can go back and with your know how you can actually, you know, create a solution that they want because many times that's, that's the problem. We, we suggest them solutions that they don't want, but we think they are great. So that's the first thing. And the second thing is try to implement solutions that are win-win solutions that are great for the environment, so great environmental solutions, but at the same time, great for the local communities. And I think it can implemented not only with coastal communities, but actually with any kind of local community.

[00:23:41] **Stefan:** Yes. I think that's a really important takeaway from this. It's important to listen to the local communities. And also part of the reason why the podcast is called if oceans could speak, is because we try to get these voices from different communities from totally different walks of life, basically. And it's really interesting to see how much is actually possible when you listen to the local communities.

[00:24:03] **Lefteris:** Yeah. Thank you very much. And it surprising how much impact you can do by just listening to them and, you know, in our case, if I give you, if I, if I wrap up with something, like if somebody wants to be included to actually provide solutions for the oceans, I think maybe the first step is just go to the ocean, you know, enter the ocean, speak with the people in the ocean and then, and then you can start having a great impact.





[00:24:30] **Jen:** How easy is it to I guess maybe if you go to these communities with some ideas already formed in your head, and then they tell you something completely different, have you got better at being flexible in your own ideas of where things you wanna take and how, how easy is that? Or is it still something that you struggle with?

[00:24:47] **Lefteris:** Hmm. You need to have an open mind, so you have your own ideas to discuss with them. They tell you something different. So you need to have an open mind and, and adapt. So something combining your first idea and the feedback you receive from them, it's usually the best thing. If you try to push your own idea which I have done at beginning of Enaleia, finally, it's not going to work if it's not something that you really want, you know, like it's not going to work, but if you have something in your mind and then they give you something, then, then it's great. And maybe I'll give you an example of example, pushing that we did in, in the later stage.

Like we were in this fishing village in north Greece that we were trying to open the project for collecting plastic, and then the leader of the fisherman told me okay. Yeah, the idea is, is great, but nobody here is gonna collect plastic from the sea. We don't have time for that. I'm like, are you going to collect plastic?

Like, yeah, yeah, I will. But nobody else will do like, okay, don't worry. Just bring your plastic back from the sea. And then I, I talk to the rest of the fishermen and each one, they tell me the same thing. Like I will, but nobody else will. So the first night out that because they, they come to the port night and everybody put plastic from the sea and they filled the port with plastic, and then they were looking at the ports and they got shocked that every day they were living all that plastic but couldn't see, so these guys, then they became some of our most, actually motivated and passionate activists. And yes, we collect a lot of stuff there. So, you know, sometimes you can both agree that an idea is great and then you need a little extra gentle push to start implementation of that. Yeah, that was my example from that.

[00:26:48] **Jen:** Thanks for that.

[00:26:50] **Stefan:** Mm-hmm you mentioned implementing great ideas. I can, imagine that the work you're doing is really inspiring to a lot of people, especially to young people from fishing communities. Would you have any



advice for someone who thinks, Hey, this is interesting, that's something I want to do, be it in fisheries or in a totally different context. So any key to success that you can share?

[00:27:15] **Lefteris:** Yeah. I dunno if I can speak about success, but but I can speak about, you know, doing similar initiatives. So yeah, I can definitely give advice on that. So maybe the first thing is to realize if, if, if you really enjoy doing that, like, if that, if that gives you motivation, if, if that, you know, Gives you a reason to wake up in the morning.

So if it's not, it's fine, you'll find something else, but you need to make sure that it's, it's something that makes you passionate on what you do. It's important here because our work is not really you know beautiful and inspiring all the time. We collect big amounts of plastic. I think most of the times I'm looking like a garbage man rather than, you know, a beach cleanup volunteer.

So it's a lot of stuff. So maybe the first thing is that to really feel that you, you love doing that. And the second thing, if, if you wanna start something similar is to start small and to start local. But the most important thing is, is to start, like when we started, we just two fishermen and now we work with more than 1,500 of them, so it's really important to start and, and go to the field and, and try to implement solutions. So I think these two basic principles can, can help you make it. And to, to be more realistic here, this is also what helped us make our model financially viable because our focus has been not on fundraising or, or even proposal writing, to be honest.

After the first month, we were really struggling to do anything and didn't really work out. I'm like, okay, we'll have our limited resources, time, money, whatever. Let's just invest them all in, in making better solutions for the local communities. And I dunno how to explain that. But after, after making the decision, after focusing on, on our work on the field funders came to us and they heard, they, they told us, Hey guys, We hear you do some real life work and would like to be a part of that. And they helped us scale. So, you know, they, they really saw the passion we had and that we have already started something that was working. So the two things I mentioned earlier, and then it just happened.



[00:29:41] **Jen:** Thanks. That's super, super interesting to hear, I guess, after everything that you've achieved over the last couple of years, what, what achievement are you most proud of?

[00:29:52] **Lefteris:** Hmm, I think it's about engaging fishing communities from all over Greece. Like all of these guys that two years ago, I would never imagine they would work with us. So I think this is the most proud. The, the biggest achievement. The second is that we, we removed more than 300 tons of plastic from the sea. So I'm like, you know, I I've made my, my plastic footprint on this planet, like super neutral.

And the third is providing solutions of circular economy, you know, finding ways so that this plastic can be recycled and and create a model that makes sense. Not just, you know, taking it from the scene and putting it into, into a landfill. So I think this, these three initiatives, because what I told you like two or three years ago, I would never imagine, that that I would do that.

[00:30:48] **Jen:** They're amazing achievements. I think you should be very proud of them.

[00:30:52] **Lefteris:** thanks.

[00:30:54] **Stefan:** Absolutely. One thing we asked our guests on if oceans could speak if you have one thought, one idea about the Mediterranean Sea, about your sea, that you think other people should know about and that you want to share, what would that be?

[00:31:12] **Lefteris:** One idea. Well, that the Mediterranean is really beautiful. That yeah, in my field, maybe an idea would be that if we implement collection of fishing gear activities in the Mediterranean countries, we can actually tackle more than 20% of the plastic pollution in the Mediterranean. So with this little initiative, we can do so much impact. So that's the one thing.

The second thing is that again, in my point of view and in my field, that if we manage to implement similar initiatives in the Nile and specifically in the Delta of the Nile, then we can reduce the pollution in the Mediterranean by 50%, because the Nile according WWF, is currently responsible for more than half of the plastic in the Mediterranean. So with two, these two initiatives, I think we





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can, yeah, the numbers say would tackle more than 70% of the plastic. So, you know, I believe we should focus on the 20% of the solutions that provide 80% of the results. And I think that's the case also in the Mediterranean Sea.

[00:32:22] **Jen:** Amazing. Thank you. Thank you so much for sharing this perspective and your story and yeah, that's all we've got to chat about, but we probably could call on asking you lots and lots of questions! So thanks again and we, we wish you all the best for the future of, of Enaleia and, and, and all of your ocean activities in the future.

[00:32:41] **Lefteris:** Thank you very much, Jennifer. And thank you very much Stefan also for the really nice questions and a nice discussion we had.

[00:32:48] **Jen:** This podcast was brought to you by members of the EU4Ocean coalition and was made by the if oceans could speak production team. Led by Anna Saito, co-organized by Penny Clarke and Arne Riedel, and presented and edited by Stephan Kirchner, Vera Noon, Agnes Nora, Anna Maria Marino, Pierre Strosser, Francisco Lopez Castejon, and me, Jen Freer.

Thank you for listening. We will be back next week with another story from the Mediterranean and this one will be recorded in Arabic. There will be a transcript and a translation in to English if you want to follow along, and I really recommend that you do! So if the oceans had a voice, what would they say to you?

