

'We can change the path we are taking'



Mirpuri Foundation's Paulo Mirpuri discusses the state of the plastic problem in 2018 – and how the Volvo Ocean Race family is working to tackle it



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The Volvo Ocean Race works with Principal Sustainability Partner Mirpuri Foundation who help develop and amplify the Race's Sustainability Programme, explore the issues and solutions to the ocean plastic crisis and contribute to the series of Ocean Summits.

Volvo Ocean Race spoke to Mirpuri Foundation President Dr Paulo Mirpuri about the partnership and his passion for safeguarding the future health of our Oceans.

Hi Paulo. Why is the Mirpuri Foundation supporting the Volvo Ocean Race Sustainability Programme?

Mirpuri Foundation focuses on six areas of activity and one specifically relates to ocean conservation. The Volvo Ocean Race was an obvious partner for this area of our work and the Ocean Summits, in seven places around the world, were a particularly important part of our decision to becoming involved. They offer a platform to help spread the message about our work whilst also presenting the opportunity to engage with other institutions and organisations who share our vision.



The Ocean Summits have significant roles to play. They offer the opportunity to learn about the latest innovative developments relating to sustainability and our oceans. They are also a platform for a range of national governments and organisations to meet, discuss the issues and explore workable solutions. Those who share the same concerns and visions find themselves in a position to connect with other like-minded people and from the interactions can lead to progressive outcomes.



Have you developed any partnerships through the Volvo Ocean Race?

Meeting with such a range of organisations offers a unique opportunity for collaboration. As a result of our involvement with the Ocean Summits we have generated dozens of important contacts and leads that we are following up.

One that has already led to a positive partnership is with a company called Seabin. They have invented a debris collection unit that can be used in marinas, ports and yacht clubs. One Seabin can collect 16,500 plastic bottles each year.

During the Ocean Summit in Alicante we met with Pete Ceglinski, the head of Seabin, and agreed to purchase a number of units. The first has been installed in Cascais yacht club, near Lisbon, and if that is successful we will expand to other parts of the Portuguese coastline and then to other Portuguese speaking countries.

The most important aspect of the Seabin is that aside from removing the debris floating on the water the thousands of people who walk past them every day can see the amount of plastic they are collecting.

We are fortunate to be sponsoring the Turn the Tide on Plastic boat alongside the United Nations. This connection has provided the Mirpuri Foundation and the UN the appropriate platform to open discussions at the highest level on issues around sustainability. We are knowledge sharing on ocean health problems and continuing talks to develop a range of projects.

Have you personally seen the effects plastics are having on our oceans?

I have been sailing since I was 14 years old and, sadly, as the years pass, places that were once considered pristine waters, are now filled with plastic. We are mobilising volunteers and municipalities to arrange clean-up operations over the coming months. Our goal is to inspire others to lead by example and create systems to continue to this process. We are also organising underwater cleans-ups, using divers, along area of the Portuguese coast.



Mirpuri Foundation were involved in the Lisbon stopover. What legacy has the Volvo Ocean Race left behind in the city?

The Volvo Ocean Race in Lisbon was only five days long but the legacy was that it created contacts for the foundation and significant engagement from the local community. At the Race Village people became aware of the plastics crisis, sustainability and the scientific aspects of the Race. This has generated a number of projects we are following up, such as a relationship between the Mirpuri Foundation and the association of retailers in Portugal to address the issue of plastic use in supermarkets and distribution chains.

The Volvo Ocean Race Globe contained a wonderful range of immersive sustainability content for both adults and children. This provided an opportunity for children to gain a better understanding of what is impacting upon Ocean health that will affect their generation. I find that children react in a more conscious way when presented with this information than adults do. I saw children coming out of the Globe telling their parents that they didn't want to use straws or single-use plastics any more. This is an extremely positive part of the legacy the Race provides.

The highest levels of microplastics that the Turn the Tide on Plastic boat has recorded so far have been found in the South China Sea. Does this surprise you?

It doesn't and furthermore the scientific data is also showing us these micro and nanoplastics are found in large concentrations near areas of large human populations. We are even finding evidence that they are carried to remote parts of our seas such as the Antarctic. It's important that we use such groundbreaking data to influence key decision makers.

Microplastics make their way up the food chain and are consumed by fish such as Mackerel and Tuna, which are then eaten by humans. Could these microplastics potentially have an effect on human health?

The Mirpuri Foundation has carried out a significant amount of research on the impacts plastics, in general, are having on human health. Whilst more research is required, we are already finding that the plastic can become harmful as it breaks down to micro and nanoplastics. You cannot see them with the naked eye but they break down into such small pieces that after they pass through the food chain from fish to humans they can go through the human intestine into our bloodstream. There is evidence that they can then affect our endocrine system.

We are planning to have a large conference in Portugal, in the near future, involving the main global experts on this issue to provide a platform to share their conclusions so we have a better understanding of the problems and where we need to focus our efforts. We want to use our collective knowledge as the catalyst that enables us to work with key decision makers on an international level and, hopefully, convert those who are more sceptical about the plastics impact on our health to understand the severity of the problem.

Do you think we can solve these problems?

I believe that the problems can be solved but they demand collective action from both the private and public sectors but we need to think longer term rather than looking for short term solutions. By adopting such an approach, through a collective global effort, we can change the path we are taking. Through such an approach, it's perfectly possible to regenerate the oceans.

And putting evidence in front of the decision makers and governments makes change, for the better, possible. By acting through diplomacy collecting data, supporting researchers and making the evidence open source we have the power to effect positive change.