

## COLOSSAL COMMUNITY-LED ISLAND CLEANUP EVENT: the first step towards a long term waste management solution for Tonga



Remarkable participation - over 3000 locals get together to cleanup the Ha'apai Islands of Tonga ([www.sustainablecoastlines.com](http://www.sustainablecoastlines.com))

Organisers and locals are overwhelmed with the success of an enormous cleanup event that was coordinated in the remote Ha'apai Islands of Tonga last Thursday, by Kiwi Charity Sustainable Coastlines.

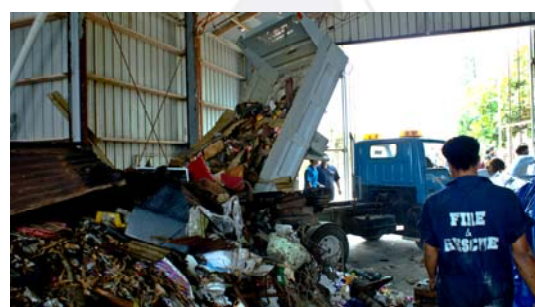
Young and old joined forces to collect a colossal pile of rubbish from every corner of Foa and Lifuka Islands, with over 3000 people getting involved from a total population of around 4500. Over 120 truckloads consisting of plastic, steel, tin, aluminum and glass are currently being sorted in Pangai in preparation for removal this Thursday.

Due to their low lying topography, the islands are unsuitable for landfill. The event is making an example of a system that could alleviate waste management challenges, with New Zealand's Reef Shipping sending eight containers to remove the rubbish from the event.

Emily Penn, who has been living in Pangai for three months working with the local community in preparation for this day, explains what the large scale cleanup event and education program strives to achieve. "Firstly we aim to develop an understanding among the community about the negative effects improper disposal of rubbish has on local health and environment. Secondly we are exposing the problem in Ha'apai in order to establish a long term waste management solution."

The Kiwi charity is now helping the local community lobby the Tongan government- who has been supportive of the initiative since it began- to achieving their ultimate goal of the project, which is to implement a waste management strategy for the area. This is set to become a formula for other small island states in Tonga and the Pacific.

Rubbish provides a breeding ground for mosquitoes, which transmit the vector born diseases such as dengue fever and Elephantitis that affect many areas of the Pacific. 97% of rubbish is burned in the Ha'apai Islands, with the plastic content releasing dioxins (which are known to cause severe health effects such as birth defects and liver cancer) in close proximity to people's dwelling areas.



Over 120 truckloads of rubbish collected ([www.sustainablecoastlines.com](http://www.sustainablecoastlines.com))



The unique environment of the area - a breeding ground for humpback whales which was once nominated as a UN World Heritage Site - has been threatened through the concentration of plastic entering the ocean.



A Humpback Whale and Calf, with plastic threatening their survival, image captured in the Ha'apai Islands, 2009 by Brian Heagney, [www.finsnflukes.com](http://www.finsnflukes.com)

The charity were joined by a crew from the Air New Zealand Green Team and locals from the Youth Congress NGO, to coordinate the cleanup and a tree planting project to fortify coastal villages against risk from cyclones and tsunamis, on the UN International Day for Preparation Against Natural Disasters during the week.

The sheer scale of the event showed that many hands can make light work. Pita Vi, Lifuka District Officer, was astounded by the participation on the day. "I can't believe there is this much rubbish in Ha'apai and when we all worked together it only took half a day to collect it."

Nonu Pohiva, Officer in Charge of the Ministry of Tourism in Ha'apai was the first to hear about the cleanup back in July. "At first I thought it was a joke, but then Sustainable Coastlines turned up and the cleanup happened. I felt humiliated that Palangis (foreigners) were coming from overseas to pick up Ha'apai rubbish – why can't we organise our own cleanup?"

Sam Judd, Co-Founder of Sustainable Coastlines commented on the change he noticed in the residents over the last few months. "The event has definitely positively changed the attitudes of the local people. I saw the enthusiasm in the people who were picking up the rubbish. Everyone was smiling and laughing – it was a great day."

For more information on the project visit [www.sustainablecoastlines.com](http://www.sustainablecoastlines.com)

High res images can be downloaded from our media gallery <http://gallery.me.com/sustainablecoasts#100076>

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