

PRESS RELEASE

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International marine conservation organisations return to Greece, to tackle ghost farms

Another massive marine protection effort just wrapped up on the island of Ithaca, in Greece. Last year, the record-breaking cleanup project by [Healthy Seas](#) and partners resulted in [76 tons of marine litter](#) being removed from seas and beaches in 8 days. This devastation was the result of a fish farm that was abandoned 10 years prior, wreaking havoc to the environment, community, maritime traffic.

It turns out that the same aquaculture was running another facility at another bay on the island, and instead of removing the nets, rings, floats when they ceased operations, the apparatus was sunk to the bottom of the sea. It is estimated that 640,000 tons of fishing gear are lost or abandoned annually in the seas and oceans¹. The phenomenon takes the name ghost fishing because the nets appear almost invisible underwater trapping and killing all manner of marine animals. It is not clear if the UNEP statistic also accounts for entire ‘ghost farms,’ a sad but true occurrence in Greece.

Veronika Mikos, Healthy Seas director: “The main difference of this ghost net cleanup project is that the owner of the abandoned fishing gear we discovered and removed, has a name. We have confronted this environmental crime 2 years in a row, worked toward restoring it, as well as understanding who is responsible and, in a position, to do something about it. The matter is very complicated. Our goal with this project is to raise awareness about ‘ghost farms’ and to put an end to them.”

With support from Hyundai, [Healthy Seas](#) and [Ghost Diving](#) together with many partners, organised a clean-up project from March until June with the help of local fishers and volunteer divers focusing on 14 different locations around the island, including the ghost farm but also the harbour of Vathy. In total, about **23,500 kg of waste** were removed of which, **18,500 kg** were nets and **5,000 kg** other types of marine litter, including several hundred meters of gillnets and long lines.

To kick off the “Return to Ithaca”, a public awareness event was organised at the main square which included the screening of a [short documentary](#) about the efforts of 2021 and a special photography exhibition which will now move on to the island’s Environmental Education Center. Education programmes and activities throughout the day were attended by approximately 180 children, meaning to say by almost all children living on the island.

Twenty-five (25) big fish farming nets were removed from the ‘ghost farm’ in the area of Kalavri, in Ithaca. The coordinated effort begun with volunteer divers from the Netherlands, UK, Lebanon, Hungary and Greece, cutting and attaching lift bags to the nets. Once at the surface, a barge with crane lifted the nets out of the water and placed them in containers that will be used to transport the nets for recycling. These nets will be regenerated together with

other nylon waste into [ECONYL®](#) yarn, the basis for new products such as socks, swimwear, activewear, carpets and more.

Local environmentalist George Lilas, the man responsible for revealing the environmental destruction, says: “Everyone on Ithaca is grateful to Healthy Seas and Ghost Diving for their efforts to protect our island two years in a row. They were aware of the destruction but didn’t have the means to do something about it besides witnessing their homeland being ruined by unethical, to say the least, business practices.”

Prevention is the only way to stop the ghost fishing phenomenon and halt ocean degradation. To this end, besides the cleanup activities, [Healthy Seas](#) and [Enaleia](#) with its Mediterranean Clean Up project, have been working together since 2017 to educate fishers in Greece and Italy and collect their waste nets before they end up in a landfill or worse, the natural environment. In the framework of the project in Ithaca, 5 local fishers were mobilised to limit fishing activity and instead collect plastic from remote locations around the island.

Other key partners include [Odyssey Outdoor Activities](#), Iaseas, Kefalonia Fisheries, the Municipality of Ithaca, the Hellenic Coast Guard. The project is held under the Auspice of the Hellenic Ministry of Maritime Affairs and the Hellenic Ministry of Environment & Energy.

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About ghost fishing

It is estimated that 640,000 tons of fishing gear is lost or abandoned in the seas and oceans each year. It is plastic waste that does not biodegrade, remaining hundreds of years in the environment, all the while losing tiny particles called microplastics that end up in the food chain. The phenomenon takes the name “ghost fishing” because the nets appear almost invisible underwater trapping and killing all species of marine animals including turtles, fish, mammals and birds that get entangled, suffer and eventually die.

About Healthy Seas

The mission of Healthy Seas is to remove waste from the seas, in particular fishing nets, for the purpose of creating healthier seas and recycling marine litter into textile products. The recovered fishing nets will be transformed and regenerated by Aquafil into ECONYL® yarn, a high-quality raw material used to create new products, such as socks, swimwear, sportswear or carpets. Since its founding in 2013, Healthy Seas has collected over 773 tons of fishing nets and other marine litter with the help of volunteer divers and fishers.

<https://www.healthyseas.org/>

About Ghost Diving

Ghost Diving is an international non-profit organization of volunteer technical divers specialized in the removal of lost fishing gear and other marine debris since 2009. To this day, the Ghost Diving team has carried out diving projects independently or in collaboration with several international environmental and/or diving organizations like: Healthy Seas Foundation, Greenpeace, WWF, Global Ghost Gear Initiative and Global Underwater Explorers.

<https://ghostdiving.org/>

Photos:

<https://www.dropbox.com/sh/mr0varnrne3f0p6/AAA24Q37aVKrefw0U1sjL8qaa?dl=0>

Video:

<https://www.dropbox.com/s/qvjnm67qfm9qr9s/ithaca%202022%20pressReel%20roughCut%20-%208%20min%20WM.mov?dl=0>

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ⁱ (UNEP/FAO, 2009), <https://www.fao.org/3/i0620e/i0620e00.htm>