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Author:

**Occupy Climate
Change (OCC!)**
*Grassroots initiatives
entry*



FORMAS



Surfers Against Sewage

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Washed up toxic litter on a beach in Wales by Beth Jnr licensed under the Unsplash License

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Where is this grassroots initiative implemented?

Surfers Against Sewage (SAS) is a grassroots movement set up in 1990 that has grown into one of the UK's leading marine conservation and campaigning charities. It was founded in Porthtowan, a small village in Cornwall, South-West England, and today it has its main headquarters in St Agnes, Cornwall. It was originally set up by Chris Hines and a group of surfers to tackle the single issue of sewage pollution in the British seas and particularly in areas where people were surfing. SAS has been working on water quality since then but over the past decade, it has evolved its campaigns in all sorts of areas and they now work on four key themes:

water quality, plastic pollution, ocean and climate change, and marine protection (particularly towards the rewilding of British seas).

While SAS is physically located in Cornwall, they work with volunteers and regional representatives in hundreds of villages, towns, and cities all over the country.

Who are the promoters? Who are the beneficiaries?

Chris Hines is the founder and original director of Surfers Against Sewage. In the late 80s and early 90s, Chris Hines and other surfers decided to take a stand against the sewage that was flowing freely into the sea and spoiling surfing at their local beach in Cornwall.

Today Chris Hines is not only a surfer and an activist, but also one of the most successful communicators in British environmentalism.

While Surfers Against Sewage began as a response by the surfing community to the dreadful state of British beaches, today SAS members, supporters and volunteers are found among swimmers, dog walkers, paddleboarders, beach cleaners, kite surfers, sun bathers and more. It is a very inclusive organisation, and in fact, their website reads *“Not just surfers, not just sewage”* (Surfers Against Sewage, n.d.). Everyone is welcome to join and support SAS actions.

What are the main values? What are the main objectives?

As Surfers Against Sewage states on their website, they love their oceans and wish to see them better protected for the future. They value their deep connection with water, and they are fighting for cleaner coastlines, free of sewage and plastic. At the core of the organisation there has always been the wish to build a community of like-minded people and together create positive change for the ocean through education, volunteering, beach cleans, campaigns, parliamentary events and advocacy.

Surfers Against Sewage main objectives are to reduce sewage and plastic pollution in British waters, but broadly speaking SAS also advocates for action on climate change. They aim at empowering communities across the UK to take action to protect oceans, beaches, and wildlife. Furthermore, they want the UK government to recognise the importance of a thriving ocean, for the planet and for the people, and to utilise its capacity as a solution to the climate crisis.

How does this initiative engage with climate?

For the first decade, Surfers Against Sewage was a single-issue campaign, advocating for sewage-free and cleaner seas. Whilst water quality issues still run strongly in the organization, SAS has grown to take on increasingly diverse, complex, and challenging conservation issues, such as marine plastic pollution, the climate crisis and ocean recovery. The organisation has had to adapt to tackle these global threats by developing new environmental initiatives, partnerships, and projects to safeguard surfing habitats.

As they state on their website, today “Surfers Against Sewage”, a name and a message the team loves and stands by, does not fully reflect the range of issues the organisation currently works on or the diversity of the community it represents.

Surfers Against Sewage works towards mitigating and adapting to climate change through several campaigning activities, such as demonstrations, petitions, beach cleans and public engagement programs, to name a few. Their campaign to end plastic pollution on UK beaches is one of the most successful in the country. SAS has been “mobilising and empowering a nationwide network of ocean activists to take actions from the beach front to the front beaches of Parliament” (Surfers Against Sewage, n.d.)

The organization is promoting a range of ways through which people can be involved in the fight against plastic pollution. For example, anyone can join or run a beach clean on any UK beach with SAS support. One of their projects is called Million Mile Clean, which is possibly the biggest beach clean campaign in the country. It is open to everyone, people can clean any location, at any time, and they just need to track their distance, submit the results, and use the hashtag #MillionMileClean when posting on social media. Since the campaign took off, around 4,200 cleans have taken place all over the UK with the help of over 142,400 volunteers who have collected nearly 400,000 kilos of rubbish.

Surfers Against Sewage aims at highlighting the root cause of the plastic crisis we are facing today, which is the systemic over-production and over-consumption of non-essential single-use and polluting plastic. Along with their commitment to promote actions wishing to see UK beaches plastic-free by 2030, they also set up educational programs to inform communities of the danger of plastic, e.g., how greenhouse gas emissions from plastic are accelerating climate breakdown and threatening our ability to maintain a survivable climate. They encourage schools, businesses, and communities to join the plastic-free movement: to date, over 3000 UK schools have signed up and have become plastic free accredited schools, as well as 856 communities and over 4000 businesses, thanks to SAS committed team.

The charity has also been the promoter of a friendly, non-confrontational and high-impact action called Mass Unwrap which sees customers simply doing their shopping and paying as usual but unwrapping their food and collecting the plastic in empty trollies to show how much waste their shopping generates. It is a great way to visually show the sheer scale of plastic packaging and a unique opportunity for customers to raise awareness of excess packaging.

Surfers Against Sewage wishes to create a plastic-free community network to free the places we live and love from single-use plastic. They wish to unite communities in the fight against plastic pollution and it is not about removing all plastic from people's lives, but to reduce and avoid single-use plastic, one plastic bottle at a time.

Furthermore, SAS raises awareness of the effects that climate change is having on the ocean and champions the oceans' role as a key tool in tackling climate change. Together with their network of ocean activists, they make sure the voice of the ocean is heard within the climate crisis. They have been doing so by, for example, setting up an Ocean and Climate petition, calling on the UK government to ensure the ocean was at the centre of climate conversations at COP26. SAS also published an Ocean & Climate Report in January 2021 and a Youth Ocean & Climate Manifesto: their ambition is for the UK to be net zero carbon by 2030. They are calling for changes in legislation and government policy and for climate change to be at the centre of decision making across every government department; they are calling for ocean rewilding to remove carbon from the atmosphere and for a blue circular economy which actively regenerates the ocean.



Surfer participating in a SAS beach clean on Croyde Beach in North Devon, UK by Surfing Croyde Bay licensed under the Unsplash License <https://unsplash.com/photos/YuI8wTqBpsA>

What is the timeline? Are there already visible effects? Is this initiative conducive to broader changes?

As mentioned above, SAS started off in 1990 as a grassroots movement, driven by a group of passionate surfers in a small village in South-West England, and today it is a very successful and well-respected marine conservation charity in the UK. Described by the BBC as being among the British government's most sophisticated environmental critics, Surfers Against Sewage has helped to bring about enormous environmental change in the country.

Their high-impact campaign against sewage early on was one of SAS biggest achievements and probably what made them one of the leading UK marine conservation charities today. In the early 90s, SAS challenged the EU Bathing Water Directive and the Urban Waste Water Treatment Directive 1991 and campaigned to secure higher water quality standards at all UK bathing waters. They soon became high profile eco-activists and, clad in wetsuits and gasmasks, carried surfboards into boardrooms and political meetings, advocating for cleaner waters. As a result of their work, the UK has seen massive investment in the sewerage infrastructure and much higher bathing water standards protecting the health of surfers, swimmers, and all other recreational water users all over the UK. In 2016, 98.5% of England's

bathing water passed the Bathing Water Directive's minimum standards, compared to what would have been only 27% in 1990 when Surfers Against Sewage started campaigning.

In 2013, Surfers Against Sewage delivered the biggest petition in enviro-surf history at 10 Downing Street, calling for better recognition and protection of Sites of Special Surfing Interest in the UK. The Protect Our Waves petition was supported by over 55,000 people and it has led to the formation of SAS's own All Party Parliamentary Group. This is an extraordinary platform for SAS to raise its coastal conservation concerns with politicians in Parliament.

Today SAS runs one of the UK's biggest campaigns to tackle marine litter, mobilising thousands of community volunteers every year, lobbying government and industry for more urgent action to reduce the tide of plastic on UK beaches and highlighting the issue in the mainstream media.

2021 was a crucial year for the organisation, built on a foundation of many years of campaigning. SAS managed to make water quality and sewage pollution a priority issue in the Environmental Act. They were successful in calling for the legal obligations on real-time sewage pollution information from water companies and a commitment to Parliament reporting on a new plan to tackle sewage pollution in 2022. The amendments that were passed would help drive a progressive reduction in the amount of sewage pollution in the UK.

Which limits does it encounter?

As most grassroots organisations advocating for changes in environmental legislations, Surfers Against Sewage are no different in finding challenges when dealing with politicians and water companies. In a recent interview Hugo Tagholm, CEO of Surfers Against Sewage, points out that after their successful campaign against sewage started in the 1990s, which drove to an important decade of investment to tackle sewage pollution, "water companies have become complacent as they tend to put profits before the environment" (Our Shared Seas, 2022).

Holding politicians and water companies accountable is one of the difficult tasks of the organisation, but SAS is committed to drive change, and they believe it is fundamental to pressure the government and the water industry into prioritising the ocean's needs. While the system in place can somehow limit their work, SAS greatest strength is the millions of people they inspire, engage, and mobilize to care and act every day.

Are any shortcomings or critical points visible? What other problematic issues can arise from its implementation?

Surfers Against Sewage are a hugely proactive organization and their aim of building more resilient communities in the UK has proven very successful over the years. SAS has been inspiring thousands of people nationwide to rethink plastic consumption and to act against climate change. They bring communities of ocean lovers together using a varied range of tools which allow their actions to be accessible and available to most people. Their website is easy to navigate and it is the best way to find out how to get involved. They have a great social media presence and promote action via Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter. However, I am not sure whether finding information about SAS and their activities can prove challenging for digitally excluded people. People living by the water, particularly in coastal towns, would probably know SAS for their beach cleans and many actions of civil disobedience over the years. On the contrary, others who do not have direct and frequent access to the sea, may not be aware of SAS unless they are on social media and/or intentionally look for activities that SAS would be promoting. Perhaps organising more public engagement activities through regional representatives and ambassadors around the UK would help reaching out those people who are digitally excluded. According to a study conducted by the Office for National Statistics, in 2018 there were still 5.3 million adults in the UK who never used internet or had not used it in the previous 3 months (ONS 2019).

Surfers Against Sewage offers a number of ways through which people can take action and support their work. Yet, some of their events are not fully accessible to everyone as, for example, beach cleans and some acts of civil disobedience cannot be always accessed by elderly or people with disability. This is not unique to SAS and I think it is a problematic issue for many grassroots organizations, mostly because our cities, towns and villages are not truly disabled-accessible and all-ages-friendly. It would be great to have SAS ensure that all their events are age-friendly and with disabled access. Although, I fully understand that accessibility is a much bigger issue that in some cases would be beyond SAS capacities.

How would it be potentially replicable in other settings?

Surfers Against Sewage started in a small coastal village in Cornwall but over the years it has created a nationwide network of ocean activists, and today supports villages, towns, and cities all over the UK. In view of that, SAS can very easily be replicated in other settings and other countries.

A similar organisation has, in fact, recently been set up in Australia with the name Surfers for Climate. The movement was started in October 2019 by surfers Johnny Abegg and Belinda Baggs, and it became a registered charity in 2020 with its headquarters in Byron Bay, a popular coastal town in New South Wales, Australia. Surfers for Climate seems to share very similar values with their partner organisation Surfers Against Sewage: they love and respect the ocean; they welcome surfers and ocean lovers of all abilities, from all identities, backgrounds, and beliefs; they wish to connect and collaborate with like-minded communities, businesses and organisations to make change happen. Both organisations also share similar goals, although while Surfers for Climate seems to be more oriented towards campaigning against coastal and offshore fossil fuel development, SAS prioritizes the fight against plastic and sewage. Surfers for Climate is a much recent organisation, but they seem to be off to a great start as they have already caught the attention of thousands of people from the surfing community across Australia.

As many of us around the world love the ocean, I believe that Surfers Against Sewage can and should be used as a model for great change and replicated worldwide.

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