

**The Business
Purpose Project.**



Creating a Sustainable Model for Ocean Regeneration.

The SeaTrees Story

By Phil Preston

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With growing urgency for climate change solutions, a group of surfers got together to hatch a plan. They realised that fundraising \$50k or so was hardly going to change anything - so how could they increase their own personal impact many times over?

It became apparent that making some impact isn't that hard, however making a meaningful level of impact and driving systemic change is much harder.

The oceans absorb about a third of man made CO2 emissions and 90 percent of the excess heat generated in its production. As co-founder of the not-for-profit organisation, [SeaTrees](#), Michael Stewart figured the real dollars for tackling ocean regeneration reside in for-profit companies and he sought to find a way of unlocking those funds.

Since its formation in 2018, SeaTrees has transformed from a donation-heavy model to a more scalable and financially sustainable one, and we can learn from their journey.

What does SeaTrees do?

SeaTrees connects individuals and [partner organisations](#) with projects delivering outcomes, typically in the form of mangrove, kelp, coral or seagrass restorations. It turns out that coastal ecosystems are 5x to 10x more effective than rainforests at removing carbon from the air.

To date they've [planted](#) 1 million sea trees comprised of mangroves in

Indonesia and Kenya, along with kelp restorations in California and coral fragments in Bali, Indonesia. Coastal water system protection in Cambodia is another type of project.

“... coastal ecosystems are 5 to 10x more effective than rainforests at removing carbon from the air.”

This translates into 355,000 tonnes of CO2 sequestered, supporting 38 communities and playing a role in protecting 55 threatened species. The byproducts of their work include local job creation and protecting lifecycle habitats for fish, turtles and birds.

SeaTrees is addressing [Sustainable Development Goal 14: Life Below Water](#) by enhancing the sustainable use and conservation of our oceans. It's one of the sustainable development goals that tends to attract less attention and resources than others.

What is their model?

SeaTrees is becoming less reliant on donors as time passes, with more than 80% of their funds now coming from brand partnerships. Getting money from donors - while still important - requires a lot of time commitment and can easily distract a not-for-profit from maximising its impact.

[Products](#) they offer to partners include initiatives that the consumer or retailer can support, such as "buy one plant one", "buy one restore one", "buy one

plant some", wiping out your event impact and balancing brand impact. Within two years of creating these solutions their revenue grew enough to cover their scientific, educational and outreach costs.

A good example of deeper brand partnering is with Bumble Bee Seafoods, who'd developed a sustainable seafood initiative that needed to be translated into action. They identified ocean regeneration as a high impact activity and SeaTrees presented as a logical partner.

How did they improve financial sustainability and scale?

Even though they've boosted commercial revenues, donors remain an important part of their model. A donation is often the first engagement point for an individual who may then advocate to other people and businesses in their network.

"... they doubled their income in the space of 18 months"

In the early days of a project, donations are a vital source of capital to draw down upon before the brand partner revenues arrive. And they've found that money attracts money - fuelling a rise in inbound enquiries from high net worth investors and reducing their need for constant pitching!

With an array of attractive products gaining traction with their partners, they doubled their income in the space of 18 months with growth continuing at double digit rates, supporting the expansion of their environmental programs.

What could this become?

SeaTrees hopes to support 100 new projects over the next 10 years. If they achieve this goal it could translate into millions of tonnes of CO2 sequestered.

Another benefit lies in addressing the lack of data available on these types of environmental initiatives, so they're helping scientists build out the knowledge needed to improve impact in the future. Chief scientist, Kevin Whilden, is a secret weapon - brand partners love meeting him and 'geeking out' on their projects and promoting SeaTrees through their own networks.

Insights

What are some of the key insights from their success? Firstly, find a way of clearly defining the impact you make using a metric that makes sense from a marketing and financial perspective - then focus on packaging that into a solution.

Secondly, make the solution and messaging simple enough so that anyone can easily share it with others, especially decision makers.

And thirdly, it doesn't hurt to treat your donors, partners and all key stakeholders like valued customers. Strength of brand, ease of implementation and product innovations are critical success factors for any enterprise operating in competitive markets.

Conclusion

SeaTrees is essentially a social enterprise because the majority of its income is derived from product or service based revenues as distinct from donations or grants. This greater level of financial security brings more confidence, more investment and more impact to their cause.

It paints a picture of a group of ocean lovers transforming their personal passion into an organisation with purpose, turning the traditional grass roots model into something bigger.

Their customer service obsession makes it easy for partners to get involved and, with consumer expectations rising at a rapid rate, SeaTrees can help brands like Bumble Bee Seafoods with compelling solutions to their own business challenges.

SeaTrees is leveraging the cause-related model to transform the scale of their impact - addressing an environmental problem using a sustainable business model.

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About the author



Phil Preston is a purpose speaker, author and founder of The Business Purpose Project - helping executives and leaders navigate the shift to the purpose economy.

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This article presents Phil's independent view of the SeaTrees' journey, and readers should note that many of the figures, quotes and metrics have been sourced from SeaTrees staff, website and online articles.

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