



Flip - Flop: Recycling for Social and Environmental Regeneration

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The Flipflop concept started in 1997 on the north coast of Kenya, in the Kiunga Marine National Reserve, in a project of the World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF) and Kenya Wildlife Service working with local communities to secure the future of the area's people, habitats and species by promoting sustainable and responsible interaction with the environment. Here the local women, young men and children started to collect this washed up rubbish from as far a field as Japan, Indonesia, Malaysia and China to make toys, fishing buoys and cushion stuffing.

The story started when a health worker was looking for ways to improve the diet of the local people, but villagers had little money. As she walked the beaches, deserted except for washed up flip-flops, she suddenly saw this free resource for the creative women and youth of the area to earn an income. They began by chopping up the flip-flops to fill cushions, with children playing with the discarded off-cuts, turning them into boats and planes. From this a small toy industry was born that has matured into a cottage industry supplying beautiful and diverse products such as beads, key rings and animal sculptures ... and now fashion and household accessories. It is hard to believe that a simple flip-flop can be transformed from environmentally damaging waste into eye-catching glamour using only human creativity.

Learning from successful craft industries in Eastern Africa, UniquEco was born, a 'socially-responsible entrepreneurship' to produce and market products that have a social and ecological mark. UniquEco primarily works with recycled flipflops from the beaches of East Africa, and has expanded to recycle discarded and unwanted plastic bags, inner-tubing, canvas, garden mesh and aluminium, the 'flip-flop equivalents' in Nairobi's busy towns.

In developing this concept, UniquEco has learnt many valuable lessons about sustainable conservation and how to make it work for local people dependent on the environment:

- people better understand the concept of business than aid as it has a direct cause and effect experience;
- people's skill base and creativity are broadened and fostered through direct action;
- training and outside ideas complement local skills in areas such as product perfection, packaging and design;
- a separate marketing platform is critical to long-term success.

UniquEco now has a central workshop in Nairobi and also works with groups located in informal settlements in crowded city centres such as with special needs children in Nairobi's Kibera.

Families now have money to spend on education, healthcare and house-building, and women are earning an income, helping to redress gender inequalities. We hope that the 'Flipflop' wheel continues to whirl – that of cleaning up the world's litter and providing opportunities to some of the poorest communities and individuals to improve their lives and the environment on which they depend

Photography by Etienne and Lucy Oliff, Wildlife and Educational Documentaries

