NICK – NET-WORKS PROJECT

**Nick:** My name’s Nick Hill. I work in the marine and freshwater … um … international team at the Zoological Society of London. Um, ZSL is an international conservation charity … um … working in fifty countries world-wide, and one of the projects we work on and— and one of the places we’ve done a lot of work is in the Philippines … um … where we run a project called Net-Works. Um, Net-Works is a really exciting initiative … um … very different and a— a lot of fun for us to all work on. Um, and the objective of Net-Works is to … um … turn old discarded fishing nets … um … in the— in the central Philippines eventually into carpet tiles which I put on the floors of people’s houses and offices in different parts of the world.

Um, so discarded fishing nets are made from nylon, which is a form of plastic … um … that is very high-grade … um … plastic. Um, so it’s an engineering plastic and it has a lot of uses, it’s quite valuable. Um, it’s al— it’s used in fishing nets, particularly in its purest form, and also in carpets in— in its purest form. But it’s also used in computers … um … car tyres, all sorts of different things. Um, when it’s used in fishing nets … um … then those fishing nets are often monofilament fishing nets … um … which means that they are— they catch on things very easily … um … so they catch the fish very easily. Um, but the trouble is they get damaged after a bit of time, and after two or three months these nets are damaged and ripped and they don’t catch fish as well as they used to. So at this point the fishermen often throw the nets away. In places like the central Philippines … um … which are in rural, remote communities … um … very poor communities, they don’t have access to the same sort of recycling and waste management services that we do … um … in UK. Um, so most of the time people just throw them on the beach or just dump them in the sea, which is a real problem for the environment. The plastic can last for up to six hundred years before it degrades … um … and then during that time if it’s in the sea or on the beaches it can continue to catch and ensnare marine life, which is a process called ghost fishing. So it’s called ghost fishing because these— these nets catch… um … the fish and the fish die, the crabs die and they rot … um … but they don’t actually have any benefit for any of the people. So it’s reducing the fish catches of the local people and really having a negative impact on their income.

Now this is very bad in these contexts as well, especially in the Philippines because … um … fish catches … uh … have been decreasing for a long time … um … so people’s income have been decreasing for a long time. Now, many of these places are heavily, heavily over-fished, so any additional pressure such as g— … um … ghost-fishing is really not very helpful. So it doesn’t just effect— have a terrible effect on the environment and the marine life and its— … um … that … um … lives there … um … it also has a very negative effect on the local communities and populations that live there and depend upon that marine life. The fishers in the central Philippines that we work with are— are completely dependent on the sea one way or another … um … mostly for fishing but also for— they do some seaweed farming and other activities in the sea. Um, so yeah, this has a serious cons— … um … negative consequence for them.

Um, ghost fishing isn’t just a problem in the Philippines though, of course, there’s also a problem all around the world, in all the oceans of the world, and large commercial scale fisheries also use nylon nets. And sometimes those nets can be lost at sea where they can continue to catch— out in the deep sea where they can continue to catch fish. Um, we’re not working with that directly ourselves in the Net-Works project cos we’re focused really on the small-scale … um … fishers in developing countries. Um, and the thing that really makes our project different is that we— we have set up community based supply chains … um … to be able to collect nets off the beaches and out of the environment, and also to get nets from the fishers after they have finished using them so that they don’t throw them into the sea. Um, so the fishers can sell their nets to community groups that we set up, and then the community groups aggregate all of those nets, make sure they’re clean and ti— and nice. And then they sell them to us as one group … um … and we— we sell them on to— we send—take— … um … help— help them or facilitate them reach that— reach a market. Um, and those nets actually got to Slo— Slovenia, where there’s the only recycling plant in the world … um … for nylon. So that’s not something that they can easily sell— send their nets to directly without our help. So we set up these kind of community groups … um … who— who can do the buying within the communities … um … and we use a system of community banking.

Um, so— and that means— what we do for that is we help to organise more groups of people of ten to twenty-five people who attend every week and they save some money together. So they— they save money in a— in a lockbox … um … which is relatively secure for them, or very secure for them … um … and they put money every week into that box and then over time as that fund buil— builds that they are putting money into, they can start to lend that fund to each other. And that provides a really important service to these— in these communities as well, because they often don’t have access to any sort of financial services, so it can be very difficult them— for them to manage their finances at all and very difficult for them to access funds when they need to, for example, when they want to send their children to school, or when they want to invest in a new a— activity, or they want to, kind of, improve their house or repair their house. So these community banks serve an important function in themselves for the— for the communities.

Um, but from— from the perspective of Net-Works, they access the focal point. So rather than us having to go round all of the communities and all of the people and try and buy the fishing nets from individual people, which would en— entail a lot of cost, the communities do it themselves. And that means we can pass on a much higher price to the commun— to people in the communities, so they benefit more from the process. And they al— and it also means that in—gives them a higher incentive to go and collect the nets off the beaches and clean them.

Um, a very interesting part of the project is that the material that we create through this, because it has been pre-processed by the community themselves, is some of the best m— material that even the recycling plant … um … in Slovenia … um … c— … um … receives. So the— the group of people that do the recycling themselves are a— a— a group called Aquafll … um … who have pioneered this great … um … recycling method, so they can turn the fishing nets into raw nylon. Then Aquafil sell the nylon to a company called Interface, and Interface turn that nylon— that raw nylon into carpet tiles. Um, and that gets distributed all around the world. So they’ve just recently launched a product called Net-effect which incorporates the nets and— and will incorporate the nets from the Philippines. It’s not a huge volume of supply compared to the amount of … um … uh … net— net that they recycle globally from commercial fisheries and others. Um, so we have collected so far … um … since we’ve set the project up last year, we’ve collected eleven tonnes of net, which is a lot of net … um … it takes up a huge amount of space. Um, but compared to all the commercial scale fisheries where the nets are very much bigger, they’re a lot heavier … um … they can collect— they can get more like three or four thousand tonnes of— of net a year. So it’s not a huge component to it yet but it’s a very— it’s very important cos it’s helping to really … um … remove some of this … um … damaging … um … material from very … um … fragile environments and fragile ecosystems.

So that’s— that’s a very important thing from a conservation perspective. And it also … um … helps to— … um … has— has a positive impact on the livelihoods of these people in these communities. So we’re operating now in about twenty five communities in the Philippines. Um, there’s about— been about nine hundred people engaging in this— in the project … um … over the past year. So we’ve only been— really been operating for a year … um … and it’s really— it’s really exciting to see the sort of positive response that the communities have had to it.