

**Pam Ferris-Olson (00:04):** Today on the Women Mind the Water Artist Series, I'm speaking with Erin Smith. Erin is the CEO of Ocean Sole, a social enterprise that upcycles flip flops found along the beaches and waterways of Kenya. Ocean Sole has created a successful model for cleaning up ocean trash and transforming the trash into colorful sculptures, high fashion clothes and mattresses. Ocean Sole also provides a local community with sustainable employment and educational opportunities. The Women Mind the Water Podcast series engages artists in conversations about their work and explores the connection with the ocean. Through their stories, Women Mind the Water hopes to inspire and encourage action to protect the ocean and her creatures.

**Pam Ferris-Olson (00:51):** I am really pleased to welcome Erin Smith to the Artist Series podcast. Erin has worked in telecommunications and finance before making a pivot in 2016 when she became CEO of Ocean Sole. Erin may not be an artist herself, but she oversees an organization that employs talented artists who create colorful and engaging sculptures from the tons of flip flops that wash up along the shores of Kenya, a country in East Africa. The men and women who are employed by Ocean Sole work in various capacities, from beach cleanup to sculpting the discarded flip flops into colorful big smile producing sculptures. Ocean Sole is a social enterprise that supports over 1200 people and recycles about three quarters of a million flip swaps annually. Welcome, Erin.

**Erin Smith Smith (01:47):** Thank you.

**Pam Ferris-Olson (01:48):** Thank you. I am looking forward to learning more about Ocean Sole and sharing some terrific pictures. Folks, you really should make time to watch the video podcast so you can see the work of Ocean Sole's artists. Erin Smith, I was fortunate many years ago to visit Kenya. I didn't get a chance to visit the beach, so I'd like to begin by having you describe the coastal community in which Ocean Sole is based.

**Erin Smith (02:16):** Well, thank you, Pam Ferris-Olson, very much for having me, first, and I'm happy to tell you all about Ocean Sole. Ocean Sole has two headquarters. One is in Nairobi, where we produce and make the art, and I'll explain why we have that workshop there; and then we're based out of Kilifi, Kenya, which is between Mombasa and Malindi on the Indian Ocean, and that is where we run all of our coastal community work in terms of beach cleanups, working with women in particular, and doing a lot of our conservation educational programs there along those schools, because they're the most impacted from over fishing and some of the other things that are going on in the deterioration of ocean health.

**Pam Ferris-Olson (03:05):** Okay. So, who's the founder of Ocean Sole, and what was the inspiration or motivation for her to create a socially conscious environmentally focused enterprise?

**Erin Smith (03:16):** So, Julie Church is the founder. It started off, I would say, as a project, Julie was inspired. She was working for the World Wildlife Fund. I always mess that up. WWF, and was working in Northern Kenya, on an island called Kiwayu. Beautiful, beautiful island, right near Somalia. And they were doing a study on turtle hatching. And unbeknownst to her and her colleagues, they ended up on this beach and they saw a bunch of village women, in particular, cleaning the beaches and keeping the flip flops aside. They were cleaning the whole beach, because they were cleaning it to have the turtles to be able to lay their eggs. Then she watched, and they were there for weeks studying all this, and then the women were taking all of the flip flops.

**Erin Smith (04:08):** And first she was like, "There's so many flip flops," which was odd, because you don't think about that. Especially those of us, I call it "above the equator" and in the first world. But the village women were taking them back to the villages and the kids were playing with them, and they were cutting them and making sculptures to make toys out of them. So they were doing everything from making little trucks and making wheels out of the flip flops. And she started to look at it in this genius way in order to upcycle this material that they had not seen, and that gave her the idea to quit the job. She started this project and started getting that going, the momentum for the whole effort that ended up becoming Ocean Sole.

**Pam Ferris-Olson (04:53):** Yeah. So there was already some movement before she came along to use the flip flops.

**Erin Smith (05:00):** Yeah.

**Pam Ferris-Olson (05:01):** Yeah.

**Erin Smith (05:02):** And I like it because it was with the Kenyan coastal women. It was a great part of those stories, two things. One, they knew they needed to clean the beaches for the sea turtles to hatch; and then second of all, they were genius enough to go, "What can we do with this asset?" Of all this trash and stuff that they found, and use it for purposes, for their children and entertainment.

**Pam Ferris-Olson (05:30):** Women are just so resourceful. It's wonderful.

**Erin Smith (05:32):** Exactly.

**Pam Ferris-Olson (05:33):** The Women Mind the Water Podcast has featured a number of environmentally focused organizations, but none up to this point have been as socially conscious as Ocean Sole. What do you think the source of this social consciousness is?

**Erin Smith (05:48):** So, just to give you a little bit of history of Ocean Sole, so Julie came on board. She called it the Flip Flop Recycling Company, and then she got an investor. This is kind of an important thing. This investor and Julie, Julie's kind of a below water girl, and the investor was a spreadsheet type kind of guy.

**Pam Ferris-Olson (06:08):** Right.

**Erin Smith (06:08):** And let's just say the two had difficulties in a common vision. So what was happening, and this is how I entered, it wasn't really becoming a business and it really wasn't becoming a nonprofit. It was stuck between two visions that couldn't coalesce together and move forward. So when I got involved, I really took some of my background in business. And I worked in private equity, as you mentioned in some of these places. And I was like, "What is the asset of this enterprise?" And the asset is people. And the people were not being managed as artisans and to their creative talents. There wasn't structure, there wasn't reward system, there wasn't benefits for them.

**Erin Smith (06:56):** So we started to do that at the employee level, which then allowed us to branch out and take that ethos into the community to say, "We need to start working with these high impact coastal communities, particularly women. What are those programs those women need, not only for life

sustainable skills, but also in terms of engaging them in conservation?" And I think that was a discipline from my background that it brought in, even on a small scale, to make such an impact. And I think that's one of the things I'm most proud of. A lot of people do conservation work, but I think because we do conservation and helping with the social side of our employees and our ecosystem, it really has seen a lot of benefits.

**Pam Ferris-Olson (07:45):** It takes something special to have you decide to settle in Kenya and focus on flip flops.

**Erin Smith (07:52):** Yeah. Well, I was 50 at the time and it was hard to get the attention of the techies anymore to listen to me like as a visionary in the tech space. I'd spent a lifetime in business class, first class hotels. I spent a lifetime alone. I really just wanted to do something that was back to who I was. I was a swimmer. I was a competitive swimmer. I've been an ocean lover, water sports fanatic. I love the ocean. I love nature. And I love art. And I also love business. And it just was a platform for me.

**Pam Ferris-Olson (08:33):** It all came together. Yeah.

**Erin Smith (08:35):** It all came together. Some days I feel like I'm the artist. That tour I showed you around my house with all of our art. I love being surrounded by art.

**Pam Ferris-Olson (08:44):** So I have to say, I never thought of flip flops as being an ocean pollution problem. At least I never imagined three quarters of a million flip flops, washing ashore in one place. Where do all those flip flops come from?

**Erin Smith (08:59):** That's a great question, Pam Ferris-Olson, and we're actually starting a whole series called "What the Flip Flop?" Because that is the one.

**Pam Ferris-Olson (09:07):** I love that title. Yeah.

**Erin Smith (09:10):** And I'm going to do a podcast or whatever people are doing nowadays to explain, because I think this is an issue. Why are there so many flip flops? The reason is that the flip flop is the number one shoe sold in the world. Three and half billion people are estimated to wear flip flops. This shoe is the poor man's shoe in the majority of countries. So if you look at where you have a combination of an emerging market, or coastal communities, poverty, low wages, what can they afford? These flip flops are between a dollar and \$3. They're very cheap. They are not [inaudible 00:09:59] They are not Tory Birch. They are not anything sexy. They are a medium to get from A to B without soiling your feet.

**Erin Smith (10:08):** I have loads of pictures. We go around the world and I take pictures of streets of people just wearing flip flops. They don't match. They don't anything. So it's not that these poor people are dirtying our oceans, because that's not fair. It's the sheer volume of which these flip flops are purchased.

**Pam Ferris-Olson (10:28):** That explains volume. But how do they end up in the ocean?

**Erin Smith (10:32):** So they end up in the ocean because these guys, they're villages. They're mostly in poor countries. Their waste management and infrastructure isn't there. So in even little community I live in, everybody wears them. They put them in the trash. The trash doesn't know what to do with them, so

they stick them into the landfill. Those landfills or dumps, because sometimes it's not even as big as a landfill, are next to the ocean or a river. Why? Because when the high tides come in, it will empty the dumps.

**Pam Ferris-Olson** ([11:05](#)): Right.

**Erin Smith** ([11:06](#)): That keeps us less work for them. They think, "Oh, that's a recycling problem." So it's the infrastructure of which this volume of flip flops comes in that ends up. So now why do they end up in Kenya? Well, we get ours mostly from Malaysia, India, China, Sri Lanka, Goa, and they come from all these massive tidal waves that come, and they just float, and we get them by monsoon. So my beach, personally, is wrecked for about six months of a year with trash. And we get of that trash on our beach, I'd say about 40 percent of it is flip flops.

**Erin Smith** ([11:44](#)): And then they come from the rivers, come from Kenya. So all the waterways come and then they end up in the ocean and our rivers. So it's a huge volume problem and it's getting worse. I can see it getting worse. And it's not just Kenya. I've seen this in Haiti. I've been to Haiti. I've been to Guatemala. I've been to Honduras. I've been to India. It's the same problem. We're just the only little ones doing it in Kenya right now.

**Pam Ferris-Olson** ([12:10](#)): Who comes up with the idea for the sculptural designs? Is it one artist that's responsible for the designs or is it a team effort?

**Erin Smith** ([12:19](#)): It depends. It's quite an interesting story about the artists. So the artists are previous woodcarvers. So how we find the artists, and that's why we have this headquarters in Nairobi, because they're mostly up country skilled guys that used to cut down trees to make curios to sell to foreigners and tourists. So they were our artists that we've recreated and reskilled them to use the flip flop medium. We basically show them a picture, and they look at the picture and everything, and then they can replicate it. When we do new things, we've designed everything from a life size Honda 2002, or the reindeer that's behind me or the seahorse, usually myself or one of the team members or Eric, my partner, we design them and get pictures of them, and then we blow them up through a big projector.

**Pam Ferris-Olson** ([13:19](#)): Right.

**Erin Smith** ([13:20](#)): And they trace them and then they're off, and they have a couple of referral pictures and they just do it by trial and error.

**Pam Ferris-Olson** ([13:26](#)): What's the most unusual flip flop design request that Ocean Sole has received?

**Erin Smith** ([13:31](#)): Well, I would say the most unusual and the most fantastic has been this Honda I refer to. We made literally a life size replica of the Honda 2002 convertible. It was for a gentleman in Alabama. He was a car dealer owner. He wanted to have this spectacular statement piece to entertain children and customers, and he did it as a differentiation of his brand. That took a lot of work. We used metal. That one had a metal frame and then we had some polyurethane in there and we had flip flops. That was, I'd say, the hardest, most spectacular piece that we've done.

**Pam Ferris-Olson (14:12):** What are the challenges of working with flip flops? For example, what happens to the leftover odds and ends?

**Erin Smith (14:18):** Well, I'll answer that first and then work my way backwards. Of course, we have waste, because we collect all of these flip flops and we carve things. If you look at the dog here, he will have started out maybe with a square nose, so obviously when the guys are carving, they'll be shavings and cutoffs from shaping his ears and his legs and stuff. That goes onto the floor, and every night they pick those up, all the artists pick those up, and we put them into a big bin, and then we shred it, and we shred it into very, very fine, not too fine, kind of fine bits, the size of the end of a pen. We take that and then we put some mosquito netting but a little bit heavier around it, and we make mattresses.

**Erin Smith (15:06):** So those mattresses are donated to the refugee camp up in Dadaab. We do that through the Red Cross or through some of the different charities. They can come by and pick those up. They can take them with them. We give them away for free. I do make dog beds for more rich people. We'll make a nice dog bed for \$80. That funds 80 mattresses. So that's what we do with our waste. Sadly, right now, unless you work with a biodegradable rubber, this medium is very difficult to recycle or change into new formation. It can be merged. I call it kicking the problem forward. So I do that with mattresses. We've taken those bits and we've also mixed those with cement and made building blocks. So maybe it's 60 percent cement and then 40 percent of our chips, and we kind of put it into the housing materials. So we try anything, and anyone that has an idea, we take it on and try to figure out what to do.

**Pam Ferris-Olson (16:14):** So in a recent podcast, I spoke to another very energetic, passionate person. I spoke to Nina Azara. She's a 14 year old Indonesian woman who has stepped onto the global stage calling attention to the illegal dumping of plastic in her country of Indonesia. She has gained the attention of many world leaders and brought some success in reducing plastic pollution in Indonesia. Do you think Ocean Sole has been effective in calling attention to plastic pollution in Kenya? And what else do you think should be done?

**Erin Smith (16:51):** That's a really thought-provoking question. It's interesting, because as you know, I kind of prepared thinking about this. I don't think Ocean Sole has been, in Kenya, a massive leader in the attention of plastic. I think Ocean Sole started, and I say this because if you look at the history and the timing, we started 10 years ago in a small thing, and we're a nonprofit retailer. We're like the Girl Scouts. We have to sell cookies to do good. The fastest way to sell art is probably not in Kenya. We do have a lot of supporters there, but you can't sustain the amount of scale that we clean and produce and upcycle just relying on that Kenyan market.

**Erin Smith (17:44):** So I do think, rightly or wrongly, because like I said, this has brought some thoughts to me, we focus a lot internationally on our product and our brand and our messaging, so I'm not sure. There's many more organizations within Kenya that are truly plastic, drilling home the message, so much so that Kenya is, I think, the only country in the world, it certainly was the first country in the world, to ban plastic bags, like the ones you get from Publix and stuff.

**Pam Ferris-Olson (18:20):** Right. Right. Right.

**Erin Smith (18:21):** It is illegal to have those bags in Kenya. They're about to do the straws, as well, and our president has been quite like, "We didn't use these things 10 years ago," which is true. When I first

went to Kenya, the plastic consumption was so low, and just with the rise in the middle class and consumerism, it's got it gone. So he's cut a lot of that off. And the UN is headquartered there in Nairobi, especially UNEP, the environmental program, which is the big for Ocean Day and everything. That is headquartered in Nairobi, so we have a lot of organizations beating on the drum about plastic and its impacts on the ocean. I think that Ocean Sole has a really unique space globally to talk about flip flop debris, and we're probably the only ones talking about it. Sadly, we're just a little art company and not a massive scale to really bring attention to it, but I think our art does get people talking about it.

**Pam Ferris-Olson (19:23):** And I agree with that, and I in no way want to [inaudible 00:19:27] to what you do, because I think it's wonderful how you've created a model that really has a social consciousness, that is creating a community of women and men that are cleaning up their beaches and putting it to a purpose.

**Erin Smith (19:47):** Yes.

**Pam Ferris-Olson (19:47):** It may be that the purpose is lost as far as these are a lot of flip flops, but I think the conversation like you're having with me now raises issues for other people, and you are in the niche that you do so well. What would you like to tell people who live outside of Kenya? How can they help or what should they be doing to make the lives of people who live along the coast better?

**Erin Smith (20:12):** Well, in particular in Kenya, how to support our cause is obviously helping fund beach cleanups and buying our art and things like that. But I think in general, it's quite interesting, Pam Ferris-Olson, because people ask me a lot. I've been on podcasts and TV shows and they'll say, "Well, Erin Smith, do you want people to stop buying flip flops?" And it's like, well, the problem is we're not the flip flop problem. Right?

**Pam Ferris-Olson (20:38):** Right.

**Erin Smith (20:39):** And it's a problem. A friend of mine said, "Oh, I yelled at my husband. He went and bought Ziploc bags." And I said, "Well, you have to understand." I think what we can do as a community at once is get our brains around thinking around, and I call it below the equator only because it seems like between south America and India and where we are in Africa, the mindset's different. A Ziploc bag in Kenya is worth a hundred dollars because they can preserve food. You know what I mean? So the value of our trash is different based on different communities, and I think that's where messaging can be so hard.

**Erin Smith (21:20):** It was great. The single use plastic straw got everybody thinking about it, but it doesn't resonate in other communities because they don't have straws. So it got us to stop here, but that hasn't solved a bigger problem over there. So it's a weird thing, because I don't know how people sitting in America, in Florida and Maine, what can we do to help with the flip flop pollution? Because we're not really causing it. Or it's getting out and sponsoring and buying. What I do with businesses is I say, "What you can do is buy a \$25,000 piece of masterpiece art that stands for flip flop pollution, and you're educating every time somebody walks into your lobby."

**Pam Ferris-Olson (22:04):** Right.

**Erin Smith (22:04):** You've got a piece market talks about flip flop pollution and its destruction and its havoc on wages and health of employees, et cetera, cetera. Until somebody smarter comes along and tells me from a science perspective what can be done. Biodegradable flip flops. That's a choice we can all make.

**Pam Ferris-Olson (22:25):** I'm going to ask you, because I imagine a lot of listeners who want to know how they can buy an Ocean Sole creation, where are these sculptures available?

**Erin Smith (22:35):** So we are online at oceansoleonline.com, and we're migrating to OceanSole.com. You'll find us. We're the only ones there. Ocean Sole Africa. We're all those brands. And we sell online, and you can buy everything from \$20 to \$900 online. If you want something made specifically, like your dog or your cats, we make a lot of bespoke or custom pieces. We have a lot of people that have designed things for themselves, like a peacock or various things. And chickens. We're about to do some chickens for a big feed store. We get in touch with you. We work with you through the design process and that is quite fun to do.

**Pam Ferris-Olson (23:19):** Erin Smith, I want to thank you for joining me on the Women Mind the Water Podcast. I hope listeners have found the story of Ocean Sole inspiring and informative. I'd like to remind listeners that I've been speaking with Erin Smith for the Women Mind the Water Podcast series. This series can be viewed on womenmindthewater.com. An audio only version of this podcast is available on the Women Mind the Water website, on iTunes and other places. Woman Mind the Water is grateful to Jane Rice for the use of her song, Women of Water. All rights for the Women Mind the Water name and logo belong to Pam Ferris-Olson Ferris-Olson. This is Pam Ferris-Olson Ferris-Olson.