

# Saving the PLANET

Pat Smith, 71, started a one-woman campaign to clean up the ocean – one beach at a time

When Pat Smith's youngest son, Mark, then 40, invited her to the cinema on Mother's Day in March 2017 to watch a special showing of *A Plastic Ocean*, a documentary about plastic pollution in the world's oceans, it was to have such an impact on the holiday cottage owner from Cornwall that her life was never really the same again.

The film shows a team of documentary makers who had set out to follow the lives of blue whales – only, devastatingly, they instead discovered that the world's oceans were so saturated with plastic that the whales and other creatures living in and around the seas were struggling to survive.

The film highlighted the fact that every year, eight million tonnes of plastic are dumped in our oceans, to the extent that a day-old Laysan albatross chick would already

**'Plastic never breaks down, but we keep making more and more of it'**

have 276 tiny pieces of plastic in its body. Pat found the film horrifying, deeply upsetting and shameful.

'Watching these beautiful creatures trying to swim and

survive in an environment completely overwhelmed with pieces of plastic debris – from drink bottles to carrier bags and children's toys – was absolutely heartbreaking,' she remembers.

While many of us would have left the cinema that day feeling perhaps moved and, at most, motivated to use less plastic where we can and recycle a little more, Pat decided that wasn't enough.

Instead, she made a plan – with the help of five friends and her husband, David, then 70 – to tackle every business in Cornwall, whether it was a hotel, restaurant or bar, and campaign to stop them using plastic straws, launching 'Final Straw Cornwall' soon after watching the life-changing film.

'For days after watching that film, I just couldn't sleep,' she says. 'The poor creatures were suffering and it was all because of us. Besides, I felt personally responsible for what was happening, and very guilty.'

Born in 1948, just as plastic consumption was



Just some of the plastic Pat's found

**DID YOU KNOW?**

The most commonly littered items are cigarette butts.

really becoming rife, baby boomer Pat says

it was throughout her lifetime – between 1950 and 2015 – that the annual production of plastics increased nearly 200-fold to 381 million tonnes.

'The man-made material basically never breaks down, but we keep making more and more of it,' she says in dismay.

Despite Final Straw Cornwall becoming a massive success, with almost all businesses in her county no longer offering their customers plastic straws by 2018, Pat still felt there was more she could do.

An ex-farmer and running

a holiday cottage business with David, she knew a lot of people in the local community, so it didn't take long for her to gather support from others and organise weekly beach cleans.

'We would pick up everything you could imagine on those two-hour weekly cleans. I even found a life-size female mannequin – it had been washed up on the shore,' she says.

Then, on New Year's Day in 2018, Pat set herself a resolution.

'I decided that I was going to clean a new beach every week, and I started a blog, writing about the devastating effects of each product I discovered on the

**DID YOU KNOW?**

One in four people admit to 'careful' littering – leaving packaging behind when eating or drinking 'on the go'.

beaches,' she explains.

Armed with a litter picker, gloves and a bin bags, Pat set off in her car around the coast of Cornwall and Devon once every week in 2018, regardless of the weather. She collected endless bags of litter, and wrote 52 blog entries – one for each beach she visited.

'As well as larger pieces of plastic, like water bottles and carrier bags, there are always so many wet wipes and tiny pieces of plastic that the sea has worked on over years and years, and regurgitated onto the shore,' she laments. 'You just wouldn't believe how much of it I was picking up, it was truly disgusting. But getting out in the fresh air, and helping to get rid

of it, was so satisfying.'

It wasn't long before the grandmother of two was dubbed 'Action Nan' by her local community, a title that has stuck ever since.

'I suppose you could say I am always on the go, but I'm just a granny who picks up litter, at the end of the day,' she laughs modestly. 'But at least now I know I am making a difference.'

Pat says anyone can do the same, and you don't have to live near a beach, either, because every piece of litter you pick up in a town or city is one less piece that will eventually end up in the sea.

'I would urge everyone to go out there and do what they can – safely, of course,' she

says. Although, because of her age, Pat is classed as vulnerable with regards to Covid-19 and has had to stay indoors for much of the time, she says she's raring to get going with her litter-picking expeditions as soon as she can.

'Nothing can stop me for long,' she smiles.

## Do your bit

As well as being unsightly, litter is a serious social, economic and environmental issue. It causes harm to communities and wildlife and, in an era when local authorities' budgets are coming under increasing pressure, it costs over £1 billion each year to clear up. Yet it is entirely preventable.

Visit [keepbritaintidy.org](http://keepbritaintidy.org) to find out how you can help.



Pat is a nan on a mission



WORDS: HOLLY SAWYER, FRANCES LEATE. PHOTOS: PAT SMITH/SWANS