

# This 26-year-old is cleaning up Andamans, one beach at a time

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The scent of the salty sea wafting through the air, your hair swept up in the wind, it's bliss — that is, until your sandy feet encounter a plastic bottle... and then another. Garima Poonia went to the Andaman's [Neil Island](#) in 2017 and noticed the lack of waste management on the streets, beaches and in the resorts of the tiny island. She went back last year, this time to change things.

In the last year, Poonia's Kachrewaale Project has collected and segregated of over 250kg of trash from Neil's five beaches, rallied resort and restaurant owners to start segregating their waste and conducted workshops with local kids to explain how this form of plastic pollution affects marine life. "I didn't think it would be a long-term project, because I was supposed to go for a degree in development studies to the University of Sussex last year. But, I realized that the call for the Andaman's was a lot stronger. Preserving the islands is important because they are so unique in terms of their ecology. They house about 1,000 endemic species," says the 26-year-old.

Poonia started the project last October by going to the houses of the locals to establish what the baseline of waste management has been. "I wanted to understand how much waste a household was producing, and what they were doing with it. There is no trash collection service, so they are forced to dispose of their own trash," she says. It's a myth, she adds, that locals aren't interested in change. Of the households she has visited in Neil, most have been happy to segregate their waste, and would love a collection service.

Neil Island is small, measuring only 7km by 4km, but as tourism and commercialisation have been growing over the last few years, it has been producing larger quantities of trash. One of the biggest problems with waste management is getting the trash off the island — there is no recycling there, and recyclables need to be transported to mainland India. Neilkamal Das, the owner of Sunrise Beach Hotel and a lifelong Neil Island resident, says that they have just been burning about 80% of their trash, for lack of an alternative. The small island has room for a growing landfill, where the rest of the garbage goes.

Since October, Poonia has organized five beach cleanup drives on the island. One of the cleanups was by 33 local school students, who also attended a workshop about the environmental impact of burning waste and mounting landfills. She plans on touching base with every student from the 3 schools on Neil Island. "Kids from the islands rarely go and settle in the mainland, so it's important for them to have a sense of ownership," she adds.

Katleen Schneider volunteered with Poonia for four months, after she came to IIT Madras for a sustainable development course. The 31-year-old German resident said that the community spirit of the project, as well as the desire to preserve the beauty of the island, has made it successful. "One beach cleanup was in a protected forest area, where we had to walk through the jungle. With the support of the diving community, we were lent a boat. We couldn't dock the boat at the beach because of coral reefs, so we had to swim to the beach, collect the trash, and swim back with kilos upon kilos of garbage," she says.

Poonia hasn't managed to secure any funding, and is financing the project by securing side jobs. "I work as the editor of the magazine of a private ferry. I was also a manager at a resort, but it was too time-consuming," she says.

On the bright side, she has received a lot of support from the local authorities, including the Chief Secretary of the

[Andaman Islands](#). The recyclables are transported to Chennai with the support of the Port Blair Municipal Cooperation as well as the Defence Wives Welfare Association, who let them use navy boats.

This support from local authorities has lent the project a certain degree of legitimacy in the eyes of Neil residents. "During a workshop I conducted with resort owners, three judges and some advocates came down from Port Blair to participate and talk to them about what we're trying to do here." Poonia has convinced six of the 42 registered resorts to start segregating their waste, and is working on persuading the others.

Das, the owner of Sunrise Beach Resort feels that this project can bring about a positive change on the island. "Increased tourism led to waste being accumulated on the beaches. But with Poonia's cleanup, beaches are back to being clean. We've started to segregate our waste, and she comes to the resort and our homes to collect it," says Das.

Poonia is far from done. Having put up waste segregation posters all over the island, she plans to now put them up on every auto, cab and rickshaw to sensitize tourists. Additionally, she is working with local authorities to phase out plastic straws from the island. And after Neil she's off to Havelock to start the cleanup all over again.

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