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Theme - GreenKayak - Paddling to a Better Environment

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THEME

GreenKayak

GreenKayak — Paddling to a Better Environment

For many people, tackling the serious and complex environmental problems we face can all be a bit overwhelming. GreenKayak, a Danish NGO, wants to put a positive spin on environmental action as a way to inspire more individuals to change their habits and outlook. Their plan— use the lure of a free kayak trip to help people appreciate the beauty and benefits of nature.

Text by Steve Jarvis
Photographs by GreenKayak





The oceans are in trouble and the world's coastal waterways, which act as immense drains pushing rubbish out to sea, are at the core of this problem. While energised by the yearly harbour clean up event held by the kayak tour company he worked at, Tobias Weber-Anderson always felt a little let down when the very next day he would see just as much plastic making its way towards the sea. He knew something more substantial was needed. His response was to create GreenKayak, a system that allowed people to use a kayak for free if they made a commitment to collecting as much rubbish as they could while they were on the water.

Established in 2017, the NGO has undergone rapid expansion. Starting with one kayak in Copenhagen in its first year, by the end of 2019 they were overseeing 48 kayaks in 10 cities spanning five European countries, and they have pulled out more than 25 tons of rubbish from the water. "My dream is to make it a world-wide movement", says Weber-Anderson. With more than 13000 people so far having volunteered to be water rubbish pickers, and plans for expansion to other continents in place, there seems to be no shortage of people that think he is on to a good idea.

Although GreenKayak is free to use, it does come with some obligations. Prospective kayakers must sign a contract to acknowledge they understand the objectives, they must show consideration for any water traffic, and they must agree to collect and return with as much rubbish as possible. Lastly, participants should post the photos or movies of their experience on social media with the hashtag #greenkayak. For those thinking it is a system potentially open to abuse, Weber-Anderson responds, "the activity relies on trust, but people take the opportunity seriously, and people always come back with rubbish. Of course there is no shortage of rubbish, but everyone wants to help."

Key to GreenKayak's rapid growth has been support from the City of Copenhagen and the national tourist promotion organisation. However, GreenKayak really took off after Weber-Anderson posted a picture on social media pointing out he was constantly finding plastic beer packaging from the nation's largest brewer Carlsberg. His criticism resonated within this increasingly eco-conscious company, and not only have Carlsberg ceased plastic beer packaging, they also became GreenKayak's main sponsor, allowing the

purchase of more kayaks and expansion of the project.

GreenKayak has developed an effective model for expansion. Sponsor logos feature on the kayaks, and suitable hosts are identified and then offered a package of kayaks and inclusion in the booking system, all for no cost to the host. GreenKayak hosts, currently which include riverside cafes and a

museum, not only get to demonstrate their environmental credentials, they also benefit from attracting new visitors to their businesses and having the experience promoted via social media. Essentially, it is a free form of advertising for the hosts, and both their bottom line and the environment benefit. There are also a number of free green kayaks located at kayak tour companies. Weber-Anderson contends that allowing some free-use kayaks is a positive thing. "GreenKayak is complementary to the kayak businesses, and rather than negatively affecting business, it is instead attracting new people to the activity."

Generating new kayakers is exactly what GreenKayak wants, and their goal is to sensitise as many people as possible to the beauty and importance of the environment, and the lure of free kayaking is an ideal way to do this. For this reason, GreenKayak is also working in schools. Giving students the opportunity to try kayaking for free provides a chance to experience something fun, while directly educating them about the environment. Weber-Anderson emphasises that their activity is inherently positive, and this is important because the environment story is normally very negative. "Instead of people feeling negatively about the future because they can do nothing, when they join our activity they get a good feeling, and the feeling is contagious."

The team at GreenKayak know that volunteer kayakers alone won't save the ocean from plastic pollution, but Weber-Anderson has cause for optimism. "GreenKayak directly affects people, they can see how much rubbish is there and this brings so much awareness and

knowledge, and serves as a springboard to doing something positive." It is a strong motivation to know their work is magnified in worth because they are part of an important education process, and no doubt there will be many budding paddlers around the world only too happy to get their message.



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