

Petrice Jones (00:04):

Today, I'm talking to Stefan Berggren and Jesse Garrison about embracing sustainability at Trek, a bicycle company that goes against America's throwaway culture to build quality products that last.

Stefan Berggren (00:13):

In the beginning stages, it was a lot of asking the question, not once, not twice, but 10 times, saying we need to be part of this. There's a movement happening here. There's a grassroots development.

Petrice Jones (00:23):

As a partner of NextWave Plastics initiative, Trek is committed to keeping plastics in the economy and out of the ocean. We'll be talking about the bat cage, a water bottle holder made entirely from recycled fish nets, and why ultimately we need to reuse plastic before it gets to the ocean.

Stefan Berggren (00:37):

Well, I think there's a lot of misnomer that you can pull plastic out of the ocean and then utilize it in a product. And that's very difficult to do.

Petrice Jones (00:45):

I'm your host, Petrice Jones, and welcome to 52 Hertz, the Lonely Whale podcast. But first some good news from around the reef.

Petrice Jones (00:57):

A bit of nature a day can help keep the doctor away. A study conducted by the Wildlife Trust and University of Derby over the course of a five year period, found that a simple bit of eco therapy, and spending some time outdoors, boost participants' health by an average of 30%. Participants in the Wildlife Trust 30 Day Wild campaign were encouraged to connect with nature every day for 30 days, then they were asked to fill out a survey ranking their health, happiness, and general attitude towards nature. And as it turns out, benefits from a daily dose of nature includes significant improvements in both physical and emotional health. What's more, those improvements lasted for up to two months after the challenge ended. Spending time outside helps us feel relaxed, and it also reminds us that we're part of nature and we're not separate from it. People who feel connected to the outdoors are also more likely to want to protect it, so it's a win-win. What's good for you is good for the Earth and for the ocean. So Stefan, Jesse, thank you for being here.

Stefan Berggren (01:57):

Pleasure to be here.

Jesse Garrison (01:57):

Yeah, pleasure. Thank you.

Petrice Jones (02:00):

So I would love it for you guys to just give a quick little tidbit about yourselves and your respective roles within the company. Stefan, can we start with you?

Stefan Berggren (02:08):

Sure. I grew up in the cycling industry as a bike mechanic at 13 years of age. Somehow I found my way to Trek bikes, where I've been for 23 years now. My current role, I work as a Senior Product Compliance Manager within our legal department, and deal with different types of standards, but also I've found myself in the position of working with Jesse as an ad hoc sustainability group.

Petrice Jones (02:35):

Great, thank you so much. So Jesse.

Jesse Garrison (02:37):

So I found my way to Trek through working in the outdoor industry. So prior to this, I worked in the snow industry and in my roles at Trek so far, I was, as you mentioned, Chief Engineer, my role has changed a little bit into more of just a product and R & D focus. And through those R & D efforts, I've been working with Stefan on some of our ad hoc sustainability efforts.

Petrice Jones (02:59):

Firstly, what kind of bike guys are you? You know, do you mountain bike? Are you triathlon bikers, city bikers? What's your go to?

Stefan Berggren (03:09):

I raced a long time ago and now I'm purely a transportation aspect of it. So more city trekking, running errands. I do ride for fitness, but it's primarily more utilitarian at this point in time. I love being able to hop on a bike path, not to use my car, to run errands. I can utilize my bike anywhere in the city up to ... I think we have 65, 70 miles of bike paths. So having that luxury, if you will, is fantastic. And that's where I spend most of my time.

Petrice Jones (03:41):

It's almost as simple as that as well, right? Having bike roads, bike paths could be the difference between someone having the confidence to ride their bike in the city and not.

Stefan Berggren (03:50):

Yeah, the infrastructure is huge. I mean the US is still in its infancy of learning that compared to, say, the Netherlands or Denmark, what have you. We still have so much more room to go, but I think, I've seen during this pandemic time, streets have been shut down and it's bike path only, then there's kind of a shift in understanding with regards to city planning of, "Hey bikes are working. How can we repurpose streets for the future?"

Petrice Jones (04:16):

Alleviate traffic as well. In LA it's a bloody nightmare. You can't get anywhere via car. I ride an electric scooter. So I'm all right, but it is a nightmare. Jesse, what's your bike of choice?

Jesse Garrison (04:28):

So, well, I've got a few of all of them. So I have a commuter e-bike that I use just when I'm going to get some groceries. I do enjoy road biking a fair bit, just because you can get out, really out into the distance. But my preferred is mountain biking. I love exploring the local region, but even all over the country and just the different trails and getting into the woods and getting out into nature. And I think it's actually one of the things that helps to support the desire in myself in efforts like what NextWave is doing in the ... getting plastics out of the environment, right? It's not just the ocean, it's on the trail. I think that connection to nature is when I really enjoy it. That's part of what really gets a lot of people interested in some of the efforts that are being made to improve that experience, not just being on the bike, but enjoying where you are on the bike.

Petrice Jones (05:20):

The nature of having a bike is facilitating a better relationship with the environment and nature as a whole.

Jesse Garrison (05:26):

Yeah, absolutely. A good example with a city, even if you're new to a city and you drive around that city, it's fine. You learn some things, but if you ride your bike around that city, you start to see all of the coffee shops, the restaurants, the stores. You start to understand how to get around the city better. You really get a better relationship with your environment just by riding a bike around it.

Petrice Jones (05:47):

I want to start by asking you about one of you guys' philosophies, what it means and where it comes from, Small Hinges Swing Big Doors. What is that and what does it mean?

Stefan Berggren (05:58):

For myself it means you have to start with something small in order to move a larger direction. We have that saying because we wanted to build a metric that would allow us to essentially build our sustainability within Trek. We had to have some type of catalyst that drove bigger and greater things. And that's what I take this meaning to start with.

Jesse Garrison (06:20):

I agree with Stefan there and for me, I see it as when we are trying to find ways to make a difference that we can also look at small things, because you never know how big of a lever you might be able to

use with that to make a longterm and impactful difference. We're going to get a lot done by looking at small things and making small actions to eventually really move things forward.

Petrice Jones (06:44):

And in that vein, Trek's Bat Cage was that the very first small step in sort of outward sustainability, as far as something you offer to a customer?

Stefan Berggren (06:53):

It was. We joined NextWave plastics consortium back in 2017 as one of the founding members. And we took a look at what use case could we start with that was something that was more of a plug and play. That was something that could make a tangible difference fairly quickly. And we took a look at the Bat Cages, an opportunity to work with Bureo and using some of the six ocean-bound nylon. And since we manufacture the Bat Cage here in the US in Oconomowoc Wisconsin, we were able to work closely with that injection molder and develop this for the consumer.

Petrice Jones (07:29):

So how has that been? I know it's very easy to make a product out of virgin plastic, but you've made this choice. How has it been for you guys making this conversion? Have you seen benefits to it? Has there been downsides to making this decision?

Jesse Garrison (07:45):

From the engineering side of things, the material processors and the recyclability of materials has gotten better and better over the years. So a lot of the material characteristics tend to be pretty high as far as compared to virgin plastic. So, you're not giving up a lot in that case. And then one of the other questions that everybody asks is cost and as more and more companies do these things, the costs will come down. But currently for us, and the Bat Cage is a good example. The Bat Cage has been a product that we've had in the line for a very long time, but we saw a sizeable spike in the sales of that product alone. But now of course we tell that message, but we also make sure to say, "Hey, we're not perfect. There's more we can do. But this is one example of the efforts we're trying to make." And seeing the response from the customer only helps to support our efforts internally to say, "Where else can we do this? Where else can we look to find more opportunities for this? Because the customer wants it. And it means something to them."

Petrice Jones (08:52):

Making it clear why you do these things is one of the things that gets it over the line for people to go, "Yeah, this is something I want to be a part of." And also the fact that it's got a sick name as well. I read that I was like, "The Bat Cage? I like this."

Petrice Jones (09:05):

And Stefan, you've been at the company for a long time. Have you seen that it's gotten easier to source these materials?

Stefan Berggren (09:11):

I've been trying to push the sustainability initiative for a while now, but we've embraced the whole sustainability movement within Trek. One of the reasons we really wanted to get involved with NextWave, because it essentially was Dell computers taking the lead and saying, "We want to develop the first ever ocean plastic supply chain." There really hasn't been a solidified supply chain for ocean-bound plastics or recyclable materials.

Stefan Berggren (09:37):

So it was building that from scratch then becoming involved in that and working with people such as Bureo, who sourced fishing nets from Chile and also other people throughout the globe coming together as a group, how do we develop and ensure that the supply chain is viable, that it's going to have room to grow, but also meets corporate social responsibility as well for the international community?

Petrice Jones (10:00):

You've been on the forefront of pioneering this within Trek. How's that process been? Have you met a lot of resistance? Have you faced a lot of challenges to get people to understand why this is such a big deal?

Stefan Berggren (10:12):

In the beginning stages, it was a lot of asking the question, not once, not twice, but 10 times. Working with our VP of supply chain, saying, "We need to be part of this. There's a movement happening here. There's a grassroots of development."

Stefan Berggren (10:25):

I saw an opportunity for us, as being a green product, to take a forefront within the bicycle industry and take a lead here. So it really has just been coming back and saying, "I know we can do this. How do we do this?" And really pushing it up the senior leadership chain.

Stefan Berggren (10:42):

One of the books that really helped us do that, it was a book called All In by David Grayson and I highly recommend it for senior management reading. It's a great way to take a look at sustainability and see how you can fit sustainability within your company.

Petrice Jones (10:58):

And as far as from the engineer's incorporating this material, how have they received it?

Stefan Berggren (11:04):

I think a lot of the engineering and product group have truly embraced this.

Jesse Garrison (11:09):

You've got every team is looking at what products they're currently making or what products are coming in the next year or two that they can start now and think about how to integrate the process. And that's been really, really meaningful for development and getting everybody to make that part of the thought process as opposed to, "Well yeah, that'd be nice, but we don't have what we need." Well, we do. And we're going to go with it.

Petrice Jones (11:32):

That's fantastic. I want to talk about ... I want to move on to America and its throwaway culture. England's a fairly wasteful country, but it's a trip to be here and see this level of casualness towards waste. You guys being in Wisconsin, what's ocean conservation to the every man over there?

Stefan Berggren (11:53):

Speaking from living in Madison. I think we kind of live in somewhat of a bubble. I think a lot of our Madison community is more representative of European culture. We have great bike paths. We have great restaurants, that type of aspect. I think it's more of a mindfulness in our community. We're very open about recycling. We're very open about lake waste, about yard waste. People are really interested in committing themselves to sustainability at home. There are programs for education in our schools that talk about sustainability. So it's definitely a different mindset in Madison compared to the entire state.

Stefan Berggren (12:29):

But I think from a wastefulness aspect of it, we like to have easy access to products. We want to have them right now. We want to be able to discard them when they don't work anymore. So I think it really is changing the way that we view products and being more mindful about how they could be repurposed and that whole circular economy aspect.

Petrice Jones (12:51):

What other ways are you guys working to change that on a cultural level? Like the mindset of this just throwing things away?

Stefan Berggren (13:00):

I think it harbors back even before the Bat Cage, we produced a bicycle called the Belleville and it was all from recycled steel. We had eco-friendly saddle, grips, tires. So even back then we were scratching at the surface of what can we do? I think we have an opportunity to focus directly to the cycling community and provide products that fulfill that circular economy need and looking at how we

can put products into the market, but also be concerned about their end of life use.

Petrice Jones (13:31):

Are you the sort of the only biking company doing this? I know you're one of the biggest biking companies.

Stefan Berggren (13:37):

There are other companies. You have companies such as Decathlon out of France that are doing a really good job with sustainability. You have Accell group in the Netherlands that are starting to get the ball rolling. There's definitely an interest within the cycling community as a whole. We've actually formed a sustainability group under the guise of a group called [inaudible 00:13:58] in Europe, which is a cycling industry initiative, with regard to sustainability and ocean-bound plastics as well.

Petrice Jones (14:04):

I want to ask you about, Stefan, the bike you gave to your son. What does that mean to you personally, and in terms of sustainability?

Stefan Berggren (14:14):

I had an old racing bike, an aluminum racing bike. I raced on it growing up all through high school, all through college, and then I just kept it in my shed as a frame.

Stefan Berggren (14:23):

Then my son, who would ride to school every day, even in the midst of a freezing winter in Wisconsin, which is not pretty. And he wanted to build up a single speed. So we took down the old racing frame that I had and was able to repurpose him the bike for him to use, to ride to school. And now it's one of his favorite bikes. So to see something that you can pass down to your children and have a green initiative behind it, I think that's wonderful.

Petrice Jones (14:50):

I love that, and it says much about the value of things when we believe that we're done with them. So the fact that you're able to rejuvenate something and give something, not just physical value, but sentimental value. I think that's one of the things that gets missed. I actually did have a Trek bike myself. It was a hand me down from my brother. I did have to fight him for it, but I got it in the end.

Petrice Jones (15:13):

How do we bring that idea back into people's mind to show them the value of restoring old ware?

Stefan Berggren (15:19):

It's interesting that you asked that question. One of the things that Trek has worked on for the last five to seven years is a program

called Dream Bikes. And we take donated bicycles and we repurpose them, make them safe, go over them. And we teach inner city youth on how to manage a bike shop, how to be a bike mechanic, how to build wheels and people can donate their bikes to Dream Bikes, to be sold within our stores. And it does a lot for the community, but it also teaches people that no, you don't have to throw away your bike. You can donate it to Dream Bikes, give an opportunity for youth to learn a little bit more about the bicycle industry.

Petrice Jones (15:58):

I bloody love that. How's it going? Is it working well?

Stefan Berggren (16:02):

It's going really well, especially now during this unfortunate time with the pandemic, we've definitely seen a bike boom, a huge bike boom. So used bicycles, the desire for them, is increasing as well as new bikes, but Dream Bikes is really taking off.

Jesse Garrison (16:17):

It brings up, for me, a couple of things off of your initial question about throwaway culture. And I think from an ocean standpoint, people in Wisconsin, right? We don't have oceans, but we have a lot of lakes and making sure that people understand water here is water that goes into the Wisconsin River that goes into the Mississippi, that goes into the Gulf, right? And just making sure that the story is for people about the outdoors and the environment is that everything's connected. And from that you then go to, "Okay, how do we talk about waste and about reusability?" And Trek, building really high quality product just because it's old, doesn't mean that it needs to be replaced. And that's where Dream Bikes comes in and I've got friends and they're like, "Oh yeah, I have this old bike. I haven't rid it in 20 years. I probably want to get a new one."

Jesse Garrison (17:03):

I said, "Well, local bike shops are a big proponent of fixing your existing bike, take it in, talk to them and they'll be able to get the chain looped up, replace a couple of parts and you're good to go." And now you've also plugged into the community. Dream Bikes really helps to support the idea that this bicycle is still good and you can still use it. That's helpful for the environment, avoids a throwaway culture. So I think interfacing with the old bikes, with the new bike shops is a really great thing. It really gets people talking and connected to continuing to use products. And hopefully that then also gets them to do the same with other elements of their life, that aren't just a bicycle.

Petrice Jones (17:45):

I love that. And it's also super noble because we all know the objective, I think it's called obsolescence that we've seen in recent years of people making products that don't last but they last just



long enough for you to feel hooked on them. And then they break, and they know that you're going to buy another one of the same thing. So it fulfills a very dangerous circle. So I love that you guys are breaking that and going, "No, this thing can go for as long as it can go for." Until the wheels fall off, so to speak.

Petrice Jones (18:23):

But I want to just ask how you see this ocean-bound plastic. Do you think it's going to change everything? Where do you see this going in the next sort of 10 years?

Stefan Berggren (18:33):

That's a very good question. I think it depends how we garner support from global leaders, how the US plays into it, how Europe plays into it. But the big outlier really is Asia. How can we tap into that ocean-bound plastic or recycled material, or even looking at how to approach, not using plastics. That's the better way to turn off the tap, rather than to keep bailing out the bathtub. How do we take that on? And how are we going to make that viable as a supply chain? That's the bigger question. Yes, there is potential. But we have to do somewhat of a culture shift with regard to supply chain.

Petrice Jones (19:14):

How much time do you feel we should be investing in slowing the dumping of Western trash in those countries?

Stefan Berggren (19:23):

This is where I think innovation really comes into play. You need to take a look at, "Okay, how do we turn off that tap? What do we do with the material?" I think there's a lot of misnomer that you can pull plastic out of the ocean and then utilize it in a product. And that's very difficult to do, so we need to take a look at how we're stopping the plastic from ending up in our rivers, streams and eventually the ocean. How do we reuse that material? Can we do chemical reagents and create biofuels? Can we utilize it for building blocks? I think that's where we really need to be innovative in our understanding of stopping that plastic before it gets to that point.

Jesse Garrison (20:01):

The difficulty is figuring out how to make it scale to a point that people can actually do it, right? There's desire, and the consortiums that get together to try to do that, speaking with the suppliers, with your manufacturers and knowing where all of your different sources are coming from, is the best way to get to that, right? Because every bit that we're doing, whether it be having a conversation about ocean-bound plastics in a state in the middle of America, but having that conversation to get people to understand the whole process gets us closer to where we can start to make a bigger difference. And then getting the customer to recognize the value of it, not just for the individual product, and even if that means a little bit more cost at

the retail side, understanding that those few dollars you may spend are paying dividends for a myriad of people across the world, the environment, the future, all of those things.

Jesse Garrison (20:58):

And the way to do that, aside from just the efforts that are being made through the actions of the engineering teams and the companies that are devoted to this, but also is to fully engage that customer and get them to recognize it in one place. And then once you do that, they're like, "Well, if we're doing stuff for the oceans and we're in Wisconsin, what are we doing for the land, you know?" How do we continue to get the customer there to ask that question and to demand that everybody's doing something about it? And it's little by little, but that's how we get there.

Petrice Jones (21:30):

Is there anything in the sort of cycling culture that's related to plastic or the environment that you wished that was different or that you wish would push further?

Jesse Garrison (21:39):

Stefan? Do you have anything specific? I know I've got at least one.

Stefan Berggren (21:44):

What I would really like to see, as the cycling community, is to address what is a longterm purpose use for plastic? Oftentimes we say, "Well our plastic packaging is recycled plastic." But it still gets thrown away right away. What is the product that we can develop that will have a longterm use and not get thrown away? Can we utilize that plastic as ocean-bound or other recycled material, and even taking a look at packaging saying like the whole Amazon aspect of hassle free packaging, do we really need to have packaging? Most of the time the consumer opens it up it's pretty and then throws it away. Well, that's quite wasteful. So I like us to think about that within the cycling industry. How can we utilize more natural packaging, but also do we actually need packaging?

Jesse Garrison (22:31):

In letting Stefan go first, he basically said everything I was going to say, so well done. The packaging is a huge portion of where we-

Petrice Jones (22:40):

Stole your answer-

Jesse Garrison (22:40):

Yeah, but it's great because we're not the only two in the building for sure that have really been looking at this. A lot of other companies as well ... a huge majority of what we end up wasting is just for that presentation and shipping. So how do we figure out how to do that, protect the product and not just have it be a one time use

thing?

Petrice Jones (22:59):

Guys. I really, really genuinely enjoyed interviewing you. Thank you so much for taking the time and for being on 52 Hertz.

Stefan Berggren (23:07):

Thank you very much.

Jesse Garrison (23:08):

Yeah. Thank you for the opportunity.

Petrice Jones (23:10):

Hey, listeners, just before you go, here's a quick ocean saving tip for you from our guest.

Stefan Berggren (23:16):

Encourage your employees to get out and ride. Ride to work or have a parking spot where they can park and then ride the rest of the way by bike. I think it makes for happier people. I think it makes for healthier people obviously, and just having the opportunity to get out and spin those pedals, I think, makes a huge difference for society and the environment as a whole.

Petrice Jones (23:36):

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Petrice Jones (23:48):

52 Hertz is a podcast from Lonely Whale. Our show is produced by Emma Riley and Mindy Ramaker, with writing from Kyrsten Stringer and audio engineering by James Riley. Special thanks to Young Hero, Emy Kane, Kendall Starkman, and Danny Witte. Subscribe to 52 Hertz wherever you get your podcasts. I've been your host Petrice Jones, thanks for listening. Until next time, tune into 52 Hertz and tune out plastic.