



*Sea2See Eyewear:
Sustainable Products with a Conscience*
François van den Abeele
Barcelona, Spain

François van den Abeele's idea for cleaning up plastic in the oceans emerged over time. As a journalist, he'd covered social and environmental issues in over 130 countries in some of the world's most vulnerable regions, like Sub-Saharan Africa and the Middle East. From what he'd seen, the crisis of plastic pollution in the waterways was devastating impoverished communities, and the scale of the neglect was monumental. François was troubled and often thought about this problem—and about what could be done.

“You don't just get out of bed one day and say, ‘I want to manufacture eyeglasses out of plastic waste’” he says. “I started to wear glasses later in life, so by then they were more on my mind.” One day he thought, “Hey, glasses are something people all over the world wear. Frames are made of plastic. Then the gears began turning.”

While François had no experience in fashion, he was a quick study. He discovered that fashion is a \$100 billion a year industry, and that it is among the most environmentally damaging, ranking only behind oil and gas in terms of its negative impact. His vision was ambitious, but it was not unrealistic. He'd worked with impact businesses before. “I soon realized that this was a way to create a sustainable product that was profitable, and that could help clean up the oceans.”

In 2016, he put together a team, gathered up 20 kilos of recycled plastic, brought it to a processor in Italy, and made Sea2See's first run of products—20 sunglasses. “It was a big idea and there were a lot of skeptics. Even my wife thought it was a crazy idea, using marine waste for frames. But there they were.”

The product was a hit almost immediately. To keep up with growing demand, François began working with fishermen in Spain to gather plastic. He then expanded his operation to France. Now he works with African fishing communities in Ghana, Senegal, and Togo, and he is hoping to expand to other African countries as well. Together they clean up polluted waterways while providing a much-needed revenue stream for these once marginalized fishermen. “When I first went there, they thought I was crazy,” he says. “They wondered why this guy was going to pay them for collecting waste.” To his critics, François responded, “Waste has value. And cleaning it up has a value too—it benefits everyone.”

Over time François has leveraged the power of this new community of fishermen to address other regional problems. With the excess plastic that remains after the frame-making process, he launched a line of watches that supports the nonprofit organization Free the Slaves, to stop child exploitation in places like Lake Volta in Ghana, where children are forced to work. “The sale of one watch finances two weeks of education for each kid that is saved. Our campaign is called Time for Time, because we all have time; and I believe we should give meaning to our time by giving back to the most vulnerable among us.” And not all of the waste collected by Sea2See goes into glasses or watches: they are also building a recycling plant, to provide recycled plastic for industries looking for it.

In 2017, François took his growing business to Chivas Venture, whose international contest invests in social entrepreneurs with start-up projects. Sea2See won Best Start-Up in the 2nd edition of the contest in Spain and went on to the finals in Los Angeles. While Sea2See did not receive the gold medal, in a tough field of sustainable innovators, François did receive a call some months later that made his intercontinental trip worthwhile.

When Spanish movie star Javier Bardem saw Sea2See glasses at the contest in Los Angeles, he was so inspired that he asked if he could join François and his fishermen for a day on the water. He wanted to bring his film crew along, so

they could raise awareness about the problem of plastic pollution in the ocean and showcase Sea2See's successful venture. "When Javier came out on the fishing boat to support us, it really was a boost. He genuinely wants to use his voice to help make a change, and he really did," Francois says. Together, François and Javier created a film campaign that has raised awareness about the dangers that single-use plastic straws pose to marine life.

To thank him for his generous support, François gave Javier a pair of Sea2See frames. A few days later, at the Cannes Film Festival, Javier's wife Penelope Cruz wore the frames to a film premier, and *Hola*, one of the biggest celebrity magazines in Spain, featured a signature photograph of her wearing her Sea2See frames on their cover. "It's great that we got that exposure," François says. "I really hope more influential people with a platform decide to take up this cause."

As of March 2021, Sea2See had collected 443 tons of plastic for its glasses, all while adhering to the strictest standards of the Cradle to Cradle certified products program. This program is the benchmark by which sustainable businesses are measured, particularly as it pertains to the circular economy. Sea2See has received the Platinum distinction in material health, and the Gold certification overall, meaning it has achieved excellence in each of the five categories: material health, circular economy, renewable energy, water stewardship, and social fairness. Francois is very proud of these distinctions. "It proves the purity of our recycled raw material," he says.

"We are proving that there is another way," he says. "By now, most people understand that the linear model of business just doesn't work. That's why we bring a cyclical point of view to plastic waste cleanup. We are the only business that is vertically integrated all the way from waste collection to the final product. We hope we can inspire others to do more of the same. It's important, because by giving value to waste, we have an environmental impact on the coastal environment but also a social impact, thanks to the new source of income the waste collectors have."

And François has in fact succeeded in inspiring others: for example, he was invited by sustainability experts in Brussels to speak at a conference on SIDS (Small Islands Developing States), where he met diplomats who were intrigued by Sea2See. He was then invited to attend the United Nations World Ocean Conference in New York. "When I got there, I was talking with the Minister of Foreign Affairs of Brussels, who shocked me by saying, 'I know you.' At first I thought he must be mistaken." But then the Minister pulled out his papers and showed François how he had written about Sea2See in his remarks. "I am going to talk about you at the Assembly today," he said. "We need to help start-ups that are raising the issue of ocean contamination and reusing plastic waste."

At the conference, Sea2See was showcased as an example of how to reduce marine contamination while creating value for consumers worldwide. "I was thrilled to see people catching on to the idea of a circular economy—especially those who were advocating for it so passionately. It gave me a lot of hope for what's to come."

François believes that the future of *all* business must become sustainable business, and this is where the youth can really lead the charge. "If you want to start any type of business, it's my belief that it should have an impact beyond whatever product or service you are offering. There are so many things you can do. I know it's tricky. It takes time. But if you have the resolve, you can do it. Try to have an impact. That's what I've tried to do. And if I can inspire people to try and have an impact in the same way, I've done my job. So, do it! Get involved. Sweat. Work. Bring your ideas to reality!"

In order to attain the impossible, one must attempt the absurd.

Miguel de Cervantes

Call To Action: Learn how you can turn a problem into a new business: Check out the Sea2See sustainable products: www.sea2see.org.

Stone Soup Leadership Institute
www.stonesoupleadership.org
www.soup4youngworld.com