

Imagined shoreline communities – a continent of litter picking activists

A common sight on beaches around the world is marine waste that has been washed ashore from the ocean. Oceanographer Katlin Bowman explained in her talk “What all shorelines have in common” at the Explorers festival 2018 that plastic pollution is the main problem. The situation has not improved since then. The waste one can find on beaches consists to a high degree of plastic debris such as fishing gear and plastic packaging. The increasing production and consumption of single-use plastic has contributed to this situation, that has become a problem of global proportions. Plastic decomposes very slowly and can stay for hundreds of years in nature. Cups, spoons and straws that have been used only for a short moment can be found scattered on beaches much later. Many countries have tried to target the problem by banning certain types of products, but what is needed is a global treaty targeting the production of plastic. This has met with resistance from oil-producing countries that are instead suggesting recycling as a solution. Despite several UN-led negotiations a global treaty has so far not been secured.

Despite the overwhelming scale of the issue, grass root activists around the world are engaging in some sort of damage control, by regular walking along beaches in their vicinity and picking up litter by hand. Private persons do this on their own, or in the company of a friend or a dog, and there are also beach cleanups in the form of collective events initiated by environmental organisations. Many of these activists document their work on social media, publishing photographs, short reports and sometimes whole stories on platforms such as Instagram. The objective of this study is to examine how the joint documentation efforts of grass root activists are producing a common, abstract space, a new continent with one common shoreline. If this new continent could be placed on an imagined geographical map, it would consist of all the photographs taken by the activists stitched together, creating a kind of Frankenstein landscape. The continent would also represent the online community that is formed by these litter picking activists.

The theoretical basis for the paper is be a transformation of Benedict Anderson’s concept *imagined communities*. Originally, this concept concerned nationalism, how it emerges and is maintained among a group of people in a certain time and geographical location. His 1983 book *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* has become a standard work in political science. For the purpose of this study, I propose the concept *imagined shoreline communities*. “Imagined” is taken metaphorically, but also literally, as in making images, in this case photographs. The focus is not nationalism, but rather the combination of globalism and localism. The oceans of the planet are essentially one body of water, although borders have been drawn across it. Shorelines are the interfaces between the oceans and the countries bordering on them, but the debris that is washed up on the shorelines show the artificiality of demarcations between countries. Debris can travel far and knows no borders. In the same time, walking on a beach picking up litter is a very concrete and local activity, grounded in physical space.

I have followed a number of Instagram accounts of litter picking activists during the last three years. My findings are that they are aiming at raising awareness about marine pollution among the general public and at the same time supporting and encouraging each other to keep up the work. Although litter picking is their main task, they also take the time to enjoy the beauty of nature. One example is a person who writes “I wasn’t really in the mood to photograph rubbish, so I focused on the ocean’s little wonders instead. I was able to gently return a sea star and a sea scallop back to the water.” The photo shows her hand dressed in a woollen glove, holding a sea scallop. Another example of how the community is built is a post made by a person who had recently lost a family member and told about her grief on her account. She received many sympathetic greetings from her followers and she thanked them with the words “Our trash collecting family from around the planet are just the best in so many ways!” They may never meet in person and the beaches along which they walk may be far apart and have different physical characteristics. Some are sandy, some are rocky, some are popular tourist resorts, some are remote and inaccessible. In the social media posts, we see the litter picking activists taking their walks in all kinds of weather, displaying their finds and reporting on the state of “their” stretch of the beach. Each day, new photos are added to the shoreline of the imagined new continent that I proposed above. The rough seams between the geological types that would be incompatible in “real” space are evened out by the layers of marine debris that is all too similar around the globe.

Keywords: beach cleanups, shorelines, marine pollution, litter picking, social media