From Beach Cleanup to Inner Transformation: A Marine Healing Journey in Penghu

Penghu National Scenic Area, Taiwan
Penghu National Scenic Area Headquarters, Tourism Administration, MOTC
Regional Areas (including counties, regions, provinces)
Nature & Environment

Summary of Good Practice Story
Taiwan's Penghu Archipelago sits at a confluence of currents and monsoons that wash huge volumes of transboundary marine debris ashore, overwhelming traditional resident beach-cleanup campaigns and threatening the fishing- and tourism-based economy. Government, businesses and residents shifted focus from repeated cleanup to genuine behaviour change: the 2020 "Salute to the Seas" policy clarified coastal jurisdictions and pushed source reduction (reusable tableware, banned single-use amenities across 1,387 accommodations), marine conservation was built into school curricula, and local artists turned debris into landscape art. Most distinctively, Penghu opened the Drifting Art Museum in 2025 and pioneered paid "marine debris tourism," where community youth guide visitors by kayak to uninhabited islands for cleanup, camping and beach picnics — growing participation over 300% to more than 500 visitors a year despite capped capacity. Between 2020 and 2026 these combined efforts removed over 11,400 metric tons of debris. The lesson: lasting environmental stewardship requires policy, education and tourism working together to build genuine emotional connection, not just repeated cleanup labour.

Setting the Scene: Destination & context

The Penghu Archipelago lies to the west of Taiwan, comprising 90 islands and forming Taiwan's largest offshore island group. Its landscapes are defined by basalt formations—solidified lava flows from ancient volcanic activity—alongside golden beaches and clear blue coastal waters. Positioned at the confluence of warm and cold currents in the Taiwan Strait, Penghu supports rich marine ecosystems and has developed a distinctive island cultural heritage. However, due to its flat terrain, the archipelago is profoundly affected by the northeast monsoons. Together, the monsoons and ocean currents wash ashore massive amounts of marine debris, heavily impacting the islands' ecosystems, landscapes, and the daily lives of its people.

The Turning Point: Why change was needed

Penghu sits at the confluence of the Kuroshio Branch Current and the China Coastal Current—waters that once nurtured abundant fishing grounds and diverse marine life. Driven by these currents combined with the force of the winter northeast monsoon, the coastline has become an accumulation site for large volumes of transboundary marine debris, far exceeding what manual cleanup operations can manage.

Most residents depend on the sea: fishing, water-based recreation, and tourism services form the backbone of the local economy. Yet persistent debris accumulation degrades ecological habitats, erodes the visitor landscape, and threatens community livelihoods. For years, the local response followed a traditional model—periodically mobilizing residents for beach cleanups—but the relentless flow of ocean-borne waste rendered these efforts barely effective.

This impasse prompted government agencies, businesses, and the public to reconsider their approach: the focus needed to move beyond cleanup behavior alone toward genuine behavior change—developing more creative and engaging methods to broaden participation in coastal stewardship and, ultimately, to achieve source reduction.

The Vision: What you set out to do

This transformation gained momentum as youth, residents, and government agencies united—each capitalizing on their unique strengths to drive systemic change. The shared goal: to shift the public from bystanders on the marine debris issue to active agents of waste reduction, embedding sustainable and zero-waste thinking into everyday life and cutting marine waste at the source.

This spirit is captured in our story title, "From Beach Cleanup to Inner Transformation"—the ambition extends beyond healing the ocean through cleanup actions. We want every visitor to Penghu to become a contributor to environmental stewardship during their stay.

Responsible tourism, in this vision, does more than allow visitors to relax and recharge—it generates a more meaningful and valuable travel experience. At the same time, we call on residents to protect the marine ecosystem as the foundation for a safer, more livable, and sustainably developing island home.

The Journey: How change happened

Marine debris has long been an entrenched challenge for Penghu's coastal environment.In response, local government and residents repeatedly mobilized beach cleanup campaigns. Government agencies incentivized community participation through giveaways and rewards, or hired contracted labor to maintain coastal areas on a regular schedule. Yet these efforts lacked genuine civic ownership—participants engaged for incentives rather than conviction. Inter-agency coordination was weak, with unclear jurisdictional responsibilities across different coastal zones: popular beaches attracted multiple cleanup teams in a short span, while remote and lesser-visited stretches were consistently overlooked.

To break this cycle, we launched the following actions:

1. Establishing a Collaboration Framework

Driven by the 2020 "Salute to the Seas" policy, the government clarified coastal jurisdictions and shifted its focus to upstream waste reduction. Key measures include a real-name gillnet registry, replacing polystyrene floats, promoting reusable tableware, and phasing out single-use amenities across government, schools, and the hospitality sector. Furthermore, public-private partnerships were formed to upcycle marine debris into computer peripherals, effectively reducing transport volume and carbon footprints.

2. Building Local Identity

Marine conservation was integrated into school curricula to build grassroots ecological awareness. Collaborating with local artists, residents and students transformed ocean waste into popular landscape art—such as Nanliao's buoy installations and a creative "Reunion Dinner" exhibit. Additionally, corporate CSR partnerships (such as the cosmetics retailer POYA Co., Ltd. and the insurance conglomerate Shin Kong Group) further strengthened community engagement through regular cleanups and habitat restoration.

3. Integrating Beach Cleanup with Travel

To draw visitors into the marine debris issue and embed cleanup action within the travel experience itself, Penghu established the Drifting Art Museum at the Houliao Visitor Center in the northern part of the main island in 2025. The site's direct exposure to prevailing currents and wind patterns makes it a natural debris accumulation zone—and a compelling space for visitors to confront this reality.

Through marine debris art exhibitions, visitors gain an understanding of the issue; stepping outside the gallery, they encounter the debris problem firsthand. The museum functions not only as an art space but as the entry point for Penghu's marine debris tourism experience. From here, community youth lead visitors by kayak to uninhabited islands for cleanup activities, beach picnics, and camping excursions integrated with coastal care—inviting travelers to protect Penghu's marine environment through responsible tourism. Visitors pay to join these cleanup journeys, invest their own effort in restoring the coastal environment, and then experience it in the improved state their work helped create.

Many describe these island expeditions—which carry the spirit of a "wilderness survival" challenge—as encounters that surface environmental realities of far greater significance, while opening new commercial opportunities for regional tourism development.

The Breakthrough: What you achieved

1. Results in Waste Reduction

Under the "Salute to the Seas" policy, a centralized digital registry has optimized coastal management, leading to the removal of 11,438.3 metric tons of marine debris between 2020 and May 2026. Furthermore, source-reduction initiatives—including reusable cup rentals, public water dispensers, and discount programs across 40 businesses—now prevent the use of over 150,000 single-use containers annually. All 1,387 local accommodations have also committed to stop proactively providing disposable amenities.

2. Sustainable Market Evolution and Shifting Value

Building on eight years of youth-led cleanup tours, the Drifting Art Museum opened in 2025. To protect island ecosystems, tour capacity is capped; yet, participation has still grown by over 300%, from a few dozen participants to over 500 annually. This growth highlights a significant shift in consumer values: travelers are now actively choosing to invest their effort in island sustainability rather than simply consuming the destination.

3. Transforming Debris into Environmental Curricula

Numerous primary schools across Penghu have deeply integrated marine conservation into their programs. Initiatives range from regular beach cleanups at He-Heng Primary School and upcycled debris signage at Jiangjun, to Fenggui's "Fragments to Islands" curriculum—where students assemble the map of Penghu using recovered ocean plastics, creatively reconnecting them with their marine environment.

Reflections: What you learned and what others can learn

Breaking the Cycle: Penghu overcame the demoralizing loop of endless cleanups by making marine debris an accessible issue through education, creative art, and eco-tourism.

Systemic Synergy: Environmental stewardship now relies on an interlocking system of policy, education, and commerce, rather than just a small group of volunteers.

Travelers as Guardians: Responsible tourism is now a core Penghu experience, giving visitors a defined role in restoring the coast and linking consumer habits to environmental impact.

A Long-Term Marathon: Success is measured not by temporary cleanliness, but by building lasting emotional connections to the ocean that drive sustained behavioral change.

The Ripple Effect: Lasting impact

Penghu's deep connection to the sea is currently challenged by an inevitable influx of marine debris driven by monsoons and ocean currents.The marine debris problem cannot be resolved in the near term. As the local economy shifts from fishing to tourism, Penghu has chosen to transform this environmental adversity into a unique economic opportunity. The island is tackling the issue on three fronts: implementing upstream waste reduction policies, integrating marine conservation into school curricula, and pioneering "marine debris tourism." Looking ahead, the resilient people of Penghu are embracing their identity as a destination that gives waste a new purpose. They invite travelers to experience authentic island life while actively participating in smarter, more sustainable environmental protection—a unique model that develops the local economy while safeguarding the marine environment.

Awards or Certifications

Tang Tsai-ling, founder of O2 Lab—a partner of the Penghu National Scenic Area Headquarters, Tourism Administration, MOTC—received the 7th National Environmental Education Award for her deep cultivation of the marine debris issue in Penghu.

https://www.pheeplay.tw/education/detail/1316

Web Articles

News media have reported extensively on Penghu's marine debris issues, including local youth-led beach cleanup initiatives, collaboration with government agencies to establish the Drifting Art Museum for marine debris advocacy, and the broader marine debris challenges facing the archipelago.

https://docs.google.com/document/d/1QIH5PyhOldgcEfC2ISmeJZ1xfOIJF78I/edit?usp=sharing&ouid=116240624181949782879&rtpof=true&sd=true

Other Relevant Links

https://drive.google.com/file/d/1QLRJ6lSjos9KQngqnSIE407g6pHChuND/view?usp=drive_link

Quotes or Testimonials

"You know it's hard—but it's a contribution you make with absolute willingness."
—O2 Lab, Penghu

"Cleaning up is not the only answer. Reducing is the only answer."
—O2 Lab, Penghu

"Almost everything from a human lifetime can be found washed up in the ocean. The most common items are PET bottles and single-use tableware. That's why we always say: daily cleaning up is not enough—source reduction is what truly matters."

—O2 Lab, Penghu

“Doing the right thing isn’t hard—what’s hard is doing it consistently.”
—Principal Yeh Wan-chuan, He-Heng Oceanic Experimental Primary School, Penghu

“Taking children to beach cleanups helps them understand marine pollution. Through our ‘Protecting the Ocean for Sustainability’ curriculum, we hope they reflect on how daily choices can help ensure the ocean’s sustainable future.”
—Principal Yeh Wan-chuan, He-Heng Oceanic Experimental Primary School, Penghu

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