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On the Road

News and Features from Tsunami-Affected Regions

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All photos by Ethan Gelber

The rewards of volunteering for beach and reef clean-up in Sri Lanka

by [Ethan Gelber](#), Lonely Planet Author

At the end of the day, we were scratched and bruised but stood proudly admiring several beach-stranded heaps of rubble drying under the fierce Sri Lankan sun. Piles of bricks and large chunks of masonry, bits of twisted metal and broken plastic, tangled nets, and bags and boxes full of wire and shards of glass and ceramic were harvested from the nearby reef.

My wife and I were just two of approximately 40 foreign and local volunteers who joined 10 paid locals for a beach and reef cleanup in the tsunami-thrashed seaside town of Unawatuna, on Sri Lanka's west coast.

Diving, snorkelling and wading in the sandy sub-tidal shallows and around the reef, the team assembled by IUCN-The World Conservation



Crews work together to pass and pull tsunami debris from the shallows at Unawatuna

Quick Facts:

In Unawatuna, reef cleanups may resume in August once sea conditions improve and waves have uncovered sand-buried hazards. For more information about how you can help, contact Friends of Unawatuna (www.friendsofunawatuna.org.uk) or call Project Galle (+94 91 4381076) and ask for Jake. The Unawatuna Tourism Development Society (+94 777 901559) can also provide advice.

To find out when/if cleanup work on Trincomalee's debris-strewn beaches (and perhaps more work untangling nets) is planned, contact Claudio (+94 777 160880), the owner of the dive school and centre managed from the French Garden Pragash Guest House in Uppuveli.

Other locally managed projects are supposed to be reported to the Coastal Conservation Department (+94 11 2678748).

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Union
 extracted by
 brute force
 several
 tractor-
 pulled
 cartloads of
 potentially
 perilous
 debris,
 including
 chunks as
 large as an
 8m concrete
 telegraph
 pylon.

Reusable materials were separated out and the rest transferred to an approved dumping site.

As reported by Marten Meynell, of IUCN's Colombo-based Regional Marine Program, 'IUCN is helping to remove the terrestrial debris deposited on the reefs and beaches by the receding tsunami waves in order to reduce the pressures placed on the reefs and so aid their recovery and to clean the beaches for locals and tourists alike.'



Divers at work dealing with ropes and nets from the rocks and reefs around Swami Rock in Trincomalee

My wife and I had missed an earlier weekend foray to the west-coast resort town of Hikkaduwa, where the IUCN effort cut two nets from the shallow reef-the final touches on work begun earlier by others.

However, we did not pass on a subsequent weekend of diving in Trincomalee, on the east coast, to detach great lengths of rope and net tangled in the rocks and reefs of popular fishing and dive spots there.




A dive boat with divers and a bow full of recovered nets after a morning underwater near Swami Rock in Trincomalee



The team and recovered net debris after the cleanup in Hikkaduwa

IUCN's cleanup campaign has done more than just grunt work. In addition to providing pay-for-hire opportunities for a few locals, IUCN provides education about environmental awareness and practices.

Posters (in English, Sinhalese and Tamil) are distributed to local organisations, hotel owners and tourist boards, as are best-practice guidelines for, among other things, cleaning up reefs and beaches and dealing with the waste. These guidelines are available at www.iucn.org/places/srilanka/tsunamin.htm.

 <p>About Ethan Gelber</p> <p>Born in New York City, Ethan is a devoted sojourner (six continents well covered, often by bicycle) and co-author of Lonely Planet's <i>Cycling in Italy</i>. He currently lives with his fiancée in Colombo, Sri Lanka, where he is involved in many writing projects.</p>	<p>More Stories</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Forgotten Weh Island • Flight to Meulaboh • Bachelors of Lampuuk • How I Volunteered in Sri Lanka • A New Beach • Getting in the Zone • Meet the Sloots • Salvaging Khao Lak • Thailand's Coral Reefs • The Meaning of Home <p>Featured Blogs</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • From Lonely Planet Authors on the road in Sri Lanka, Maldives, Indonesia, India and Thailand.
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