

Case Study: Wildplastic

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Purpose: “Ridding the World of Wild Plastic Waste”

Design Trait: Purpose

Key Facts

Wildplastic is a limited liability company that is steward owned. Its goal is to reintegrate “wild plastic” (see info box) into the recycling system. The company cooperates with local NGOs and communities to collect plastic from the environment, which is then recycled into trash bags and, more recently, also packaging materials. *Wildplastic* operates under a steward-ownership model, which ensures that its mission remains at the core of its operations.

Seat: Hamburg

Established: 2019

Founders: Katrin Oeding, Christian Sigmund, Dieter Gottschalk, Fridtjof Detzner, Holger Ernst, Nadia Boegli, Jascha Mähler

Ownership: Verantwortungseigentum (Steward Ownership)

Legal form: Limited Liability Company

Employees: 17

Webpage: <https://Wildplastic.com/>

Purpose, Business Model & Objectives

Purpose: “Ridding the World of Wild Plastic Waste”

What happens when seven passionate people with different backgrounds travel the world? They return to Germany united by a shared mission: combat plastic waste.

In 2017, Fridtjof Detzner and Holger Ernst were traveling through Asia, while Christian Sigmund and Katrin Oeding explored Africa and South America. During their journeys, they encountered plastic waste everywhere—on beaches, in forests, deserts, and oceans. These experiences awakened a sense of responsibility within them. Upon their return, the founders had come to recognise plastic not only as an environmental hazard but also as a valuable, untapped resource that sparked their drive to act.

What is wild plastic?

“Wild plastic” refers to plastic waste that exists outside of formal recycling systems. It can be found in landfills, natural environments, and on streets. Unlike “ocean plastic,” which describes plastic that has already entered marine ecosystems, wild plastic refers to waste at an earlier stage—before it reaches the water (Wildplastic, 2024).

Although the founders were initially scattered across Germany, they shared a singular problem: the global plastic crisis. What did it take to turn their idea into reality? Mainly, a network and expertise.

Through mutual connections, they teamed up with Nadia Boegli, Jascha Mähler, and Dieter Gottschalk. Each of them brought their unique background not only in business but in plastic, design, recycling and sustainability. In 2018, the team started with their initial idea: to produce a stylish trash bag and finance clean-ups with it. Over time, this idea evolved to its current business model.

The founders started gathering more like-minded people around them such as plastic-collecting organisations, investors and customers. Together, the seven founders created an entirely new value chain to get wild plastic back into the cycle. They source wild plastic from regions like Indonesia, Egypt, and South America.

In line with its motto, “trash to trash”, *Wildplastic* launched its first product line with trash bags made from wild plastic. Now, the company aims to extend its reach and make an even greater impact with additional products such as delivery bags or toilet paper.

Insights into the Purpose of Eliminating Wild Plastic

From the start, *Wildplastic*'s founders were committed to creating a company that prioritised purpose over profit maximisation. Their goal was to create a profitable business on the one hand, and, more importantly, to make a lasting environmental and social impact on the other hand.

Understanding the Problem: A Plastic Crisis

Since the 1950s, plastic production and consumption have skyrocketed. Today, over 6.3 billion tons of plastic exist as waste globally, and an additional 400 million tons are produced each year. Despite the high recyclability and lightweight properties of plastic, only 10% of it is recycled, while 70% ends up in the environment. This vast quantity of unmanaged waste has severe consequences for both ecosystems and communities.

“In short, 70 to 80 percent of the plastics produced globally are in the environment. This is a huge problem today. [...] the industry is producing more than ever, and we are saying that if we still produce plastics, then please use recycled and reused plastics. That’s not happening at all today and that’s our mission, to close the loops.” — Christian Sigmund, CEO and Co-Founder

Wildplastic’s aim is to transform the entire plastic system, from how society handles plastic waste to the policies that govern it. To achieve this aim, it actively participates in lobbying for plastic-positive legislation, advocating for policies that promote the use of recycled materials and discourage single-use plastics. By forming partnerships across industries and sectors, it fosters collaboration to drive widespread change.

To ensure its purpose remains at the heart of everything it does, *Wildplastic* has adopted a steward-ownership model. This model locks in the company’s mission by legally prioritising purpose over profit and prevents any form of exit strategy that could compromise its long-term vision. In essence, *Wildplastic* has rendered itself a company that will only continue to exist as long as its mission is relevant.

“Drastically speaking, when we’ve solved the problem and all the plastic has been cleaned up and returned to the cycle, there’s no reason why we should continue operating the company.” — Christian Sigmund

This mission highlights a departure from the traditional start-up focus on scaling and exiting. Under the steward-ownership model, *Wildplastic* is designed to prioritise its purpose above all else, ensuring long-term commitment to its core purpose, regardless of external pressures.

Dual Mission: Environmental and Social Impact

Wildplastic’s mission goes beyond cleaning up plastic waste. The company aims to fundamentally transform the lifecycle of plastic and the way society perceives it. By turning environmental waste into useful products like trash bags and packaging,

the company seeks to close the loop on plastic use and prevent it from re-entering ecosystems.

This purpose is deeply embedded in *Wildplastic's* operations, influencing decisions at every level, from partnerships to product development.

While *Wildplastic's* focus lies on recovering, recycling and reusing wild plastic, its purpose also has vital social dimensions. *Wildplastic* works closely with informal waste collectors, particularly in low-income countries where waste collection infrastructure is lacking.

“The social aspect is that we must not forget that two billion people currently live without waste collection and at the same time there are informal collection organisations in these often low-income countries, which represent an informal waste collection system and which deserve all the support in the world. But they are currently marginalised, extremely underpaid and often discriminated against.” – Christian Sigmund

By partnering with these communities, *Wildplastic* is not only cleaning the environment but also providing fair wages, dignified work and social empowerment to the people involved in collecting plastic waste.

How the Purpose of Eliminating Wild Plastic is Embedded across the Design of the Business

Finance and Ownership Design

Wildplastic sought financing models that aligned with its values, finding support through purpose-driven investors like Purpose Ventures e.G. Together, they developed a steward-ownership model that reflects its purpose. According to the golden share model, the Purpose Foundation holds 1% of the voting shares. While this might seem like a small percentage, it holds significant power: the golden share grants veto rights over any decisions that could divert the company from its purpose. This structure prevents profit-driven shifts and ensures the company remains mission-aligned.

Rather than pursuing exponential growth, investors expect sustainable, steady growth with fair returns over a 10-year horizon. The goal is to operate profitably, grow sustainably, and honour the trust investors placed in them.

The financial structure directly influences ownership and decision-making within the company. The founders see themselves as stewards of *Wildplastic*, with no planned or possible exit. Once they step down, decision-making power will pass to other active employees, ensuring the company remains true to its mission.

In terms of returns and equity distribution, *Wildplastic's* financing rounds reflect different risk profiles, which are tied to varying multiples that determine investors' claims on returns. These multiples represent the potential return on investment (ROI) based on the stage at which investors provided funding. Earlier investors, who assumed more risk, are entitled to higher returns. In total, *Wildplastic* completed three financing rounds:

- Initial funding round: 5.3X multiple
- First investment round: 4.5X multiple
- Second investment round: 3X multiple

This means that if investors participated in the initial funding round with 10.000€, they could expect up to 53.000€ in returns. Once the total value is distributed to investors, *Wildplastic* can recall the shares and regain control of ownership.

“This ensures there will be no mission drift for profit-driven reasons—so we don't start producing new plastic just because it's cheaper. At the same time, it guarantees that purpose and intent always remain at the core of our actions.” – Christian Sigmund

Network Design

When the idea of *Wildplastic* began to form, no infrastructure existed to collect and process wild plastic at the scale the founders envisioned. Determined to make a difference, they set out to establish entirely new supply chains and networks, partnering with local NGOs and communities around the world.

“The collection organisations need a partner to take the material off their hands and pay money for it. But that only happens if it can be processed at high quality. This is what's missing. No collection organisation has big brands knocking on their door asking for their waste, because there are still ten difficult steps in between. These collection organisations are the heart of our company. These are the people who do the important work on the ground—collecting, sorting, and ensuring that plastic finds its way back into the cycle.”– Christian Sigmund

Wildplastic's first partnership was with *Plastic Bank*, an international organisation that empowers communities in countries in the global south to collect plastic waste in exchange for financial rewards. Volunteers from this organisation helped gather the first ton of plastic, enabling the creation of prototypes. This partnership allowed *Wildplastic* to not only access raw materials but also provide economic benefits to local communities.

Overview of countries where *Wildplastic* sources (Wildplastic, 2025)

Egypt: 12 tons

Ghana: 13.86 tons

Haiti: 137.69 tons

India: 199.88 tons

Indonesia: 42.62 tons

Liberia: 7.3 tons

Nigeria: 50.46 tons

Thailand: 127.25 tons

Today, *Wildplastic* collaborates with over 50 NGOs and community-based organisations to remove wild plastic from beaches, forests, and other ecosystems. Its operations span several regions, including Indonesia, Ghana, and Egypt. The partners are local fishing families, collecting organisations and waste aggregators. These organisations act as essential partners, ensuring that wild plastic is gathered sustainably and reintegrated into recycling streams.

In addition to global efforts, *Wildplastic* also formed new collaborations in Germany to meet its purpose. While trash bags were an important first step in combating pollution, the company identified the B2B-sector as a crucial next step. With thousands of packages being delivered every day around the world and the entire hygiene sector needing ecologic solutions, they can now proudly count companies like Otto, Hermes, and Goldeimer as partners. For example, in 2021, they launched the “Ottobag”, a delivery bag made from at least 80% wild plastic. These partnerships signal a broader commitment to sustainability and set the foundation for scaling *Wildplastic*’s impact. By building global networks and collaborating with NGOs, waste collectors, and industry partners, *Wildplastic* seeks to expand its reach and multiply its impact.

“We don’t claim that our solution will solve everything, but we want to set a great example.” – Christian Sigmund

Impact-Focused Governance

Yes, profitability and fair wages are essential at *Wildplastic*, but the company’s governance framework prioritises environmental and social impact as the ultimate measure of success.

“We measure success in impact instead of profits.” – Christian Sigmund

To formalise this approach, *Wildplastic* incorporated impact assessment tools within its governance structure. Namely, *Wildplastic* conducted a Life Cycle Assessment

(LCA) comparing the environmental footprint of new plastic, recycled plastic, and wild plastic. The LCA revealed that *Wildplastic* bags emit between 32% and 55% fewer greenhouse gases than virgin Low-Density Polyethylene bags. For instance, the *Wildplastic* parcel bag alone reduces emissions by 55%, while WILDBAGs show reductions of 32% to 44%, depending on size. The assessment also demonstrated significant reductions in fossil energy consumption, water usage, and resource depletion.

In further alignment with its governance model, *Wildplastic* publishes an annual impact report alongside its financial report. In this report, the business tracks key metrics such as tons of plastic recovered, plastic provided to recyclers, and plastic cleaned up from the environment. These impact-focused metrics are its primary performance targets, shifting the company's focus from profits to environmental and social benefits.

Figure 1: *Wildplastic's* Impact Quantified



Source: Wildplastic 2024.

To enhance stakeholder engagement and ensure transparency across the value chain, *Wildplastic* launched the Wildtracker, a tool that allows customers to trace their *Wildplastic* products back to their origin. This transparency strengthens the connection between the product and its environmental benefits.

“No, we haven't defined any other KPIs, because in the *Wildplastic* business model, the KPIs are actually already a separate package. It's simple, we promise every tonne of plastic saved cleans up x square metres of the environment, saves ozone, O₂ and ensures Z working days, better working conditions and so on. And it was

possible for us to define even more KPIs, but if *WILDPLASTIC* is successful, then we are also successful in terms of impact.” – Christian Sigmund

Challenges Arising from Designing Purpose around Eliminating Wild Plastic

Establishing Reliable Supply Chains

Especially during the first three years of *Wildplastic's* journey, the supply chains posed the greatest challenge. Not only building supply chains from scratch but also dealing with country-specific challenges: For instance, sorting plastic is complicated by high levels of plastic pollution, while in Egypt, regulations on exports create additional hurdles. Most notably, *Wildplastic's* collaborations with Haitian NGOs have been halted due to political instability.

Balancing Purpose with Practical Realities

Another ongoing challenge for *Wildplastic* has been balancing its mission with technical and operational limitations. Is it better to use 100% wild plastic or to compromise on the percentage to meet technical requirements?

One guiding principle in these situations is the company's desire to shift industry mindsets and make an impact. Sometimes, this requires innovation; other times, it requires adaptation and collaboration.

“For example, with toilet paper, we can't technically use 100% wild plastic because it doesn't have the necessary mechanical properties. There's a very narrow corridor of requirements in the industry regarding tear resistance and usability, and there's little willingness to engage in discussions around this.”- Christian Sigmund

Sales Strategy: Tackling the Cost of Sustainable Solutions

Another challenge for *Wildplastic* is creating enough sales. While it generates significant social and ecologic impact with its trash bags, sustainable solutions are often more expensive than their conventional alternatives. Social enterprises, in particular, struggle with scaling up sales operations, making it harder to compete with cheaper, less sustainable products. To address this, *Wildplastic* is exploring bonus models to incentivise its sales teams. As Christian Sigmund emphasises: “we also want to have a competitive ambition [...] we actually want even more impact, even more impact actually means even more deals”. And rightly so, because what could

be more important than getting *Wildplastic* products out there and thus spreading its mission?

Aligning Mission with Stakeholder Expectations

With its mission set from the beginning, *Wildplastic* has been eager to set the appropriate structures from the beginning, too. This involved effectively communicating its purpose and impact to avoid accusations of greenwashing. One of its initial steps was to set measurable targets for assessing impact. As Christian Sigmund explains:

“In other words, at the beginning there was a life cycle assessment, a living wage inspection and a very robust process, so to speak, in which we repeatedly looked at the impact. But that was over-engineered in the sense that we didn't have any deals at the time.”

Hence, spending resources on in-depth impact assessments from the beginning was a risk they were willing to take. However, this might be unavoidable for purpose-driven firms that want to counter any possible accusations of greenwashing.

Another example of managing stakeholder expectations was the organisational structure. *Wildplastic* wanted to create flat hierarchies and a fair and efficient working environment for employees. However, they soon realised that this over-engineering slowed decision-making processes, as not everyone needed to be involved in every decision.

Fighting against Industry Standards

One of the supporting missions that come with combating plastic waste is also to educate and support change in existing practices and policies. *Wildplastic* is active and participates in politics and lobbying. However, what they face are old, powerful and loud industry giants that are profiting from the status quo:

“You also have to imagine that the oil and gas lobby (...) I think in the last 50 years they have somehow made a profit of 50 trillion euros, not just a profit, but a profit of 3 billion euros every day. And they can spend so much money on lobbying that this opponent simply seems almost overpowering right now, and yet it's complete madness, soberly considered, that this is still allowed at all.” – Christian Sigmund

In this context, *Wildplastic's* mission to transform the industry becomes even more critical. They aim to challenge these entrenched standards and advocate for sustainable practices, even when faced with formidable opposition.

Recommendations for Adopting a Regenerative and Distributive Purpose Design

Craft a bold, future-focused vision that aligns with your values and long-term aspirations. This vision does not need to be realised overnight, but should serve as a compass, guiding your decisions and actions through this transformative era.

Build strategic partnerships for greater impact. Collaboration is key to driving meaningful change. Partner with businesses, communities, and organisations that share your mission to amplify your efforts and create systemic impact. By working together, you can accelerate progress, share knowledge, and drive innovation.

Address the social and environmental dimensions of your challenge. Consider the broader implications of the issue you are tackling. For us, this meant recognising that plastic pollution disproportionately harms vulnerable communities and ecosystems. By embracing regenerative solutions—such as investing in recycled materials, circular systems, and innovative alternatives—we were able to generate a ripple effect that benefits both people and the planet.

Inspiring Redesign Beyond the Business

Wildplastic contributes to the transformation of the economic system by challenging the traditional profit-driven model with a purpose-driven, sustainable approach. By integrating environmental and social impact directly into its business design, *Wildplastic* promotes a circular economy, where waste is not just minimised but actively turned into valuable resources. Its steward-ownership structure, focus on transparency through tools like the *Wildtracker*, and commitment to sustainable growth over profit maximisation offer a blueprint for businesses to balance profitability with ecological responsibility. This shift helps to redefine success, not in terms of financial gain alone, but in creating positive, long-lasting environmental and social change.

References

Interview

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