

P E R S I S T E N C E



photo by Maurizio Milesi



Finnmark, Norway. In The Same Boat's skipper Nicolai Henningsen - 27, Norway - is on shift in the navigation cabin of the sailing vessel Qilak with Jeanne Desfontaines - 22, France. Volunteers take part to the watch on board so they can learn maritime skills.

Tanafjorden, Finnmark, Norway. The logistics of the operations are often complex. Work boats cannot always reach the shore, and when the seabed is too shallow, a dinghy is used to take the crew ashore for the clean-up mission. Here, Nicolai - 27, Norway - skipper of In The Same Boat, rows towards the work boat Dory after taking part of the crew ashore.



How plastic pollution is reshaping the Arctic and North Atlantic coastlines

Plastic pollution disrupts the idea of an untouched wilderness. Along remote and sparsely inhabited coastlines, often accessible only by boat, plastic waste, ghost nets and trawl floats accumulate relentlessly – fragmenting over time, releasing toxic substances and entering marine ecosystems and food chains.

In many of these remote regions, marine litter removal depends largely on volunteer expeditions.

Since 2017, volunteers with the Norwegian NGO *In The Same Boat* has removed more than 1,800 tonnes of marine waste through volunteer expeditions, much of it linked to industrial fisheries and aquaculture. On many beaches, litter must be carried by hand, loaded onto inflatable boats, transferred to workboats, and transported back to shore before it can even be disposed of.

Plastic has become a permanent presence in the environment. Yet the same persistence can be found in people.

Volunteers, researchers, fishermen and coastal workers confront the crisis from different perspectives. Volunteers spend months living aboard, removing tonnes of litter from isolated beaches under harsh weather conditions. Their motivations differ: from eco-anxiety to curiosity, from a desire to act to a search for meaning.

But they share a common trait: they persist.

As a photographer and sailor, I embedded within these expeditions to document not only the environmental consequences of plastic pollution, but also the everyday lives of those who have chosen to confront it.

During three months embedded aboard expeditions in Arctic Norway in 2025, I witnessed 12 volunteers and 4 skippers remove more than 57 tonnes of marine litter.

In 2026, in 11 working days in the Orkney Islands, 2 volunteers and 2 skippers collected almost 7 tonnes from just 6.6 kilometres of coastline.

Living aboard volunteer expeditions for five months over two seasons gave me access to the routines, relationships and emotional realities rarely seen beyond the cleanup itself.

Beyond documenting marine litter, this work reveals the systems that shape it: industrial fishing, scientific research, waste management, environmental policy, and volunteer labour. As public funding becomes increasingly uncertain and responsibility for marine litter remains fragmented, volunteers increasingly fill a structural gap – removing waste that would otherwise remain on the shoreline while often bearing the logistical and financial burden of transporting and disposing of it.



Bay of Brough, Sanday, Orkney Islands. Creel's pots are a common find in the area. They are portable cage traps used to catch marine life like lobsters, crabs, and prawns. The metal structure is covered with plastic that often breaks and gets lost at sea. In this bay a total of 1,6 tonnes were collected in a stretch of 850 meters.

Finnmark, Norway. Volunteers Julie - 24, Anna - 29, and David - 30, respectively from France, Germany and Costa Rica, looking toward the new cleaning locations, with the hope that one day this work won't be necessary anymore.





Vestland, Norway. The crew on Driva, one of In The Same Boat's sailing vessel, sailing south from Bergen to get ready to cross the North Sea to the Orkney Islands.



Boloquoy, Sanday, Orkney Islands. Fishing net stuck in the ground.



Cross-Kirk Westside Church, Westray, Orkney Islands. Volunteer Anna Stupfel - 24, U.S. - and skipper Jesse Magin - 24, Germany - stand with the dog of John Berry, a local from the association Greener Orkney involved in marine litter surveys and clean-ups who facilitated In The Same Boat's mission in the Orkneys. In this area a total of 900 kg were collected over 1,2 km of coastline.

Skjånes, Finnmark, Norway. After 50 hours of sailing from Tromsø to Skjånes, the base for this cleaning operation, the crew of Qilak, In The Same Boat's expedition vessel, prepares a bonfire on the beach. For the volunteers, evenings like this restore a sense of purpose - a human response to an environmental crisis still waiting for political answers.





Orphir Community School, Mainland Orkney. In The Same Boat's volunteers also held presentations at primary schools in Orkney Islands to raise awareness on plastic pollution.



Evie, Mainland Orkney. Roger Larsen, professor at UiT - The Arctic University of Norway and holder of the UArctic workshop in Orkney April 2026. Fisherman-turned-scientist witnessed a rapid increase in marine plastic waste polluting the Arctic, a byproduct of expanding commercial fisheries.



Helnessund, Nordland, Norway. In The Same Boat's skipper Joris Grüning - 22, Germany - lays on deck on top of the collected trash, under heavy rain, to allow for a volunteer to step inside the small navigation cabin.



Bergen, Vestland, Norway. Small repairs and laundry. Last preparations before sailing across the North Sea to reach Orkney Islands.

Skutvik, Nordland, Norway. The collected litter waiting for the container from the waste management company. On the island of Lundoya, 2.3 tonnes were collected along 73 km of coastline.





Orkney Islands. Marta Ruszczyńska - 30, Poland - a volunteer for In The Same Boat, on a videocall with her father while sailing back to harbor after a long cleaning day.



Boloquoy, Sanday, Orkney Islands. Jesse Magin - 24, Germany - has been a skipper for In The Same Boat since 2024. He studied sociology then volunteered for the NGO and that led to working for them. Boloquoy beach was cleaned last year and yet in 250 meters, 550 kg were found.

Skutvik, Nordland, Norway. The collected litter waiting for the container from the waste management company. On the island of Lundoya, 2.3 tonnes were collected along 73 km of coastline.





Arctic Ocean. Emma Thanadebouth - 25, France - volunteer and chemical engineer, on watch in the navigation cabin of Qilak - an expedition vessel of In The Same Boat.



Cross-Kirk Westside Church, Westray, Orkney Islands. Local farmer helps the crew by making tractor and trailer available to move the collected litter. He is talking with John Berry - co-lead of Scottish Islands Federation, Marine Litter Group - who facilitated In The Same Boat's mission. In this area a total of 900 kg were collected over 1,2 km of coastline.



Tanafjorden, Finnmark, Norway. At the end of the day, the sailboat Qilak that was anchored close to the cleanup location returns to port. Two volunteers, Jeanne - 23, France - and Anna - 29, Germany - hug each other. Volunteers who live in close quarters on sailboats for long periods of time often form very close friendships. Cookies are a must, a small reward for the hard work.



Tanafjorden, Finnmark, Norway. In The Same Boat's volunteers form a human chain to load waste onto the workboat — a symbolic gesture of cooperation amid a system where cleanup relies more on citizen effort than on industrial accountability.

Grobust, Westray, Orkney Islands. Sand nets to preserve sand dunes are laid on this beach. They are on the edge of a Neolithic site - Noltland - and also of a golf course. The material of those nets is plastic.

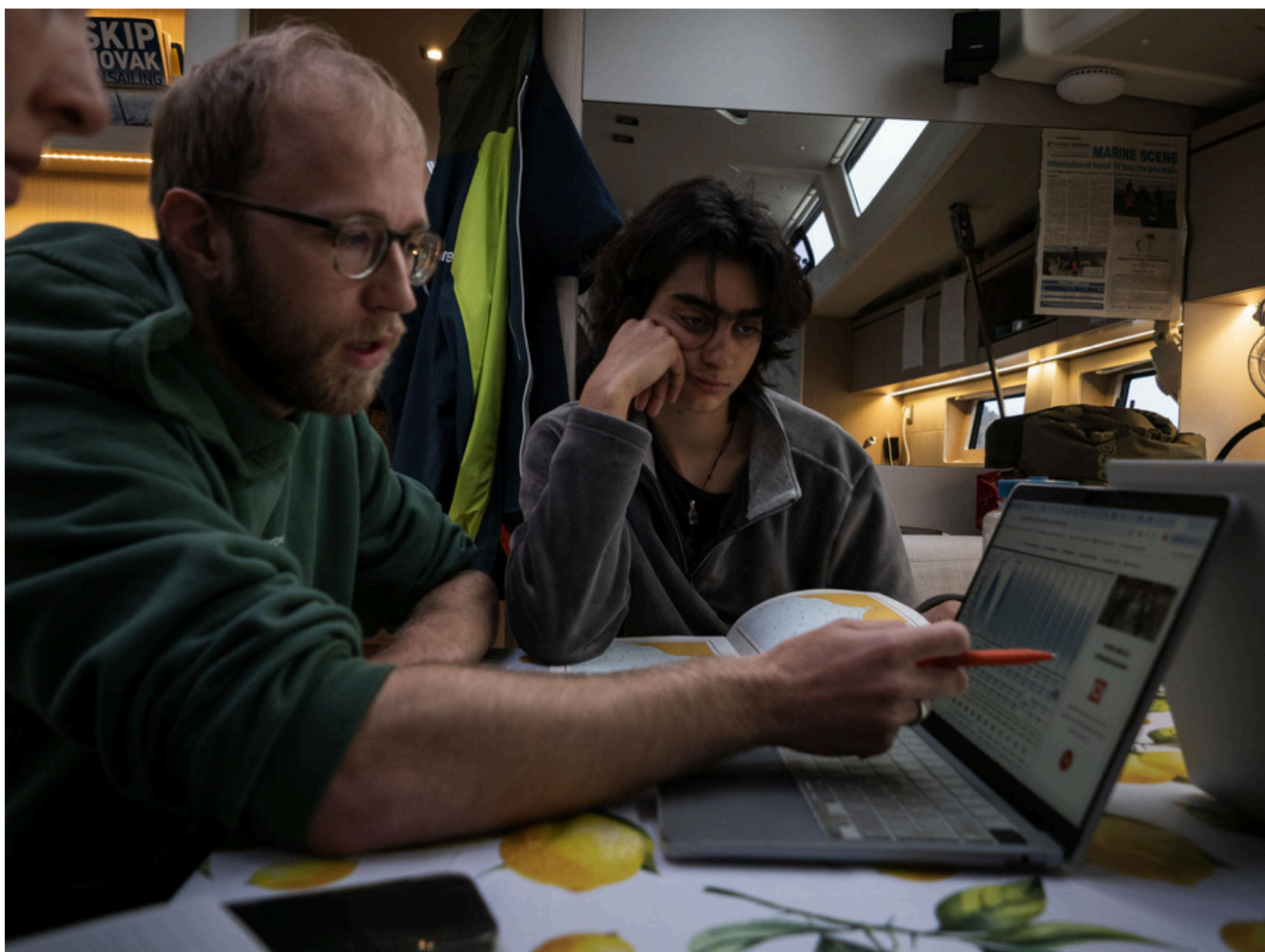




Skjånes, Finnmark, Norway. Gregor - 53, Poland - fisherman - portrayed aboard his fishing boat docked in Skjånes. After catching a ghost net, he brought it ashore to dispose of it. He was told to handle it himself and pay. In 2026 indirect waste port fee should cover disposal costs for fished litter. For litter cleaned on shore, where a specific polluter cannot be identified, anyone who picks it up assumes responsibility for its transport and disposal. Reimbursement schemes exist but are limited and do not cover all costs.



Finnmark, Norway. Nicolai Henningsen — 27, Norway — looks toward the next bay to be cleaned during a day of work along the Arctic coast. Like many skippers with In The Same Boat, he started as a volunteer: walking across rocks and tundra with bags of collected litter is part of the daily routine in areas often accessible only by sea.



Røvær, Rogaland, Norway. Skipper Jesse Magin - 24, Germany - explains the calculation of the tides to the crew. Reaching Orkney Islands must be timed not just with the winds but with the tides.



Westray, Orkney Islands. Marine litter collected gets sorted for a survey. Each item will be separated in categories, counted by number and then the whole amount weighed.



North Sea. Volunteer Anna Stupfel - 24 - U.S. - resting on the cockpit bench while on night watch with the skipper. 44.5 hours of sailing with crossed sea and waves up to 5 meters, winds of up to 38 knots, temperatures as low as 6 degrees. 4 crewmembers out of 5 were seasick for the first 20 hours.

Nordland, Norway. A volunteer for In The Same Boat walks along the shore looking for litter. She is already carrying a full bag.

