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Sonu Shivdasani

Chairman and CEO of The Soneva Group and Founder of the SLOW LIFE Foundation

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Live From SLOW LIFE Symposium

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We have just kicked off our fourth SLOW LIFE Symposium and I look forward to three days of serious and interesting discussions with a group of some of the most influential minds in sustainability. The Symposium was designed to provide maximum opportunity to facilitate conversations that will lead directly to positive change and throughout the event we will be exploring the theme of "Innovation through Collaboration", looking for new ways to collaborate to tackle the most pressing environmental problems. We want to change the future for the better and will be keeping you up to date with the arguments that are raised.

This year, our event will be chaired by Jonathon Porritt and the line-up of speakers includes Daryl Hannah, David de Rothschild, Leo Johnson and Jon Bowermaster to name just a few. Past Symposiums have resulted directly in ideas, initiatives, collaborations and campaigns that have made a real difference and we hope that this year's event will bring about some equally interesting opportunities.

As the event begins, I wanted to lay down some background on why it began. When my wife Eva and I opened our first resort, Soneva Fushi in the Maldives, in 1995 we held a belief that a company must have a clear purpose beyond making money. It must serve and contribute to the society in which it operates and it should not impact negatively on the environment in which it operates.

This responsibility to one's community is somewhat complicated for a company such as ours whose guests jet in from all over the globe. As a result our social and environmental responsibilities are as much global as they are local. We set up the SLOW LIFE Foundation to focus on change at a level beyond the direct communities in which our resorts operate and to recognise our obligations to society in general.

The work of the Foundation is supported by initiatives that we undertake at the individual resorts and over the last few years Soneva has contributed over a great deal to the activities of the SLOW LIFE Foundation, with all funds linked to changes in the way we operate. This is an important point because the funding of the Foundation has been singly through positive changes to our business practices, not through blind donations.

Five years ago whilst walking around Soneva Fushi, I noticed a huge number of plastic water bottles washing up on our beaches. Like the plastic carrier bags that have become the man-made jellyfish of the oceans, water bottles have become a plague on our environment.

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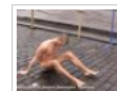
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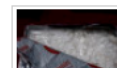
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We decided we could not point fingers at those who were allowing their water bottles to spoil our oceans while we were still serving bottled water in our resort and therefore still part of the problem. So, five years ago we took a bold decision to stop serving branded bottle water at our resorts.

All of the water that you drink at our resorts comes from our resorts and is filtered, mineralised, alkalised, and bottled on site in reusable glass bottles. We sell this water and contribute 50% of the revenues to the SLOW LIFE Foundation, with proceeds funding the work of charities such as Water Charity and Thirst Aid. To date, more than 600,000 people have been given access to clean water as a result but to have real impact we needed to engage others in the industry to do the same.

During the last SLOW LIFE Symposium we teamed up with Karena Albers to co-found WHOLE WORLD Water (www.wholeworldwater.co), an ambitious campaign to encourage the hotel industry to follow our lead in banning branded bottled water from their properties. It is great to see that we are now getting some traction and we look forward to more updates on this throughout the Symposium.

This year will be our 4th SLOW LIFE Symposium and it is testimony to the success of previous events that we have such an auspicious group of attendees, all believers in the necessity for action, and all leaders and influencers in their field.

At previous Symposiums many relationships were cemented and the seeds of future collaborations sewn. But more than that the Symposiums have been the genesis for the implementation of real change.

Over the next few days, we will be tackling the theme of "Innovation through Collaboration", looking for new ways to work together to tackle the most pressing environmental problems and to change the future for the better.

Follow Sonu Shivdasani on Twitter: www.twitter.com/TheSonevaGroup

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