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SAVING AN ISLAND

Collecting plastic waste at Pulau Mantanani, Sabah, is a good start to an organised waste management system.



School children from Sekolah Rendah Kebangsaan Tekek Tioman sorting out plastic waste.

A GAINST the setting sun, a couple stroll along the sandy beach, basking in their love. They walk past the invisible line which demarcates the luxury resort they're staying at from the public beach. Soon, they spot plastic bags floating in the water towards the pebbled beach. Near a mangrove, there are plastic bottles in the undergrowth. Soon, the stench from all this uncollected rubbish and decomposing waste from another resort is too much to bear. They turn back, determined never again to venture too far from their resort.

Julian Hyde, the 54-year-old general manager of Reef Check Malaysia (RCM) isn't surprised by this story as he's aware of how dirty our beaches have become. He feels that it's time something is done about it.

Therefore, RCM, together with CIMB Foundation, has come up with a plastic recycling programme at Pulau Mantanani, Sabah. It will be launched in mid-August, with two weekend clean-ups to collect accumulated plastic. The programme aims to implement

an improved waste management system on the island, including recycling and composting.

This project comes hot on the heels of a similar project that RCM conducted at Pulau Tioman a year ago. Julian shares the reason why RCM chose to focus their efforts on these islands in the first place.

A CHANCE DISCOVERY

In the case of Pulau Tioman, Julian used to live there before moving to Kuala Lumpur. He came to believe that the island was biologically one of the most important ones because it was a source of seeding to the other islands in the region.

"This was all by chance," he says. "There's no scientific knowledge or real study. I happened to see a wind map of the South China Sea on the Internet. I noticed that at about the time of the equinox, the winds would blow north. At the same time, there was also a mass coral spawning period. When this happened, the coral eggs would float to the surface. With these winds, the eggs would blow north. After a few days, they would become what we call 'settlement stable'. I thought that it couldn't be a coincidence that these two things happened at the same time."

Julian has since discussed this with other professionals and there is a consensus that his observations are correct. He cannot say if the same phenomenon occurs at Pulau Mantanani as there has been no sustained research about this in the area.

WASTE MANAGEMENT PROBLEM

What both islands have in common, however, is that for a long while, they didn't have an organised waste management system.

"Walking around Mantanani, you can see plastic waste almost everywhere ... under bushes, in trees, in people's gardens," says Julian.

How did so much waste get onto the islands in the first place? The answer to this question lies in understanding one of the main sources of conflict on both islands — a "disconnect" between the locals and "outsiders".

"The locals are wary of outsiders." For emphasis, Julian adds: "These outsiders could be anyone. Malays not from the island. Or white guys."

Also, the marine park on Pulau Tioman was gazetted about 20 years ago. Julian feels that many of the rules and regulations governing how the park is to be administered were implemented without much consultation with the locals. This has led to the locals being somewhat side-lined on matters relating to the management of their island.

With Pulau Mantanani, it was a quiet backwater place with few visitors for many years. In recent years, it has become a popular tourist destination. However, tourists hardly stay on the island. Instead, they will pay tour operators on Kota Belud who will take them on day trips to Pulau Mantanani. The tour operators also don't



Plastic rubbish on Mantanani Island.



cover story **PULSE** BROUGHT TO YOU BY LIFE & TIMES

AND FROM WASTE

management system, writes **Aneeta Sundararaj**

mix with the locals. So, very little money generated from such tourist activity is enjoyed by the locals.

BUILDING RESILIENCE

The plans that RCM intends to implement are aimed at "building the resilience of the reef and the community."

Julian explains: "We would like to strengthen the ecosystem so that the corals are more likely to withstand bleaching." For example, there are what he calls "local impacts" — such as tourists standing on the corals, managing the sewage from resorts and siltation — which can all be addressed. If they are not, then the reefs become bleached and that's where the next problem arises.

"If the reefs die, what will happen to the people on these islands?" says Julian. "Right now, in a place like Tioman, everyone is focused on marine tourism. So, we would also like to build the resilience of the community."

The idea then is to help the people on the islands become multi-skilled through training and awareness programmes. For example, on Pulau Tioman, there is a beautiful rainforest, but no one goes there. Julian would like to train the locals to become guides and they can take people on treks into the jungle.

START WITH WASTE

These are long-term plans. For the moment, though, Julian is hoping that the plastic

recycling programme will be the "hook" to get the attention of the locals.

On both islands, the villagers have been using the "traditional" approach to waste disposal, which is to throw everything into the sea. In the past, says Julian, this would have worked because it was just organic waste which would decompose or perhaps be eaten by marine life. Now, however, the problem is that the plastic content in waste is increasing and the plastic is returning to the islands on the tides.

"Once we have their attention, they will know about the collecting centres and start to recycle their waste. In future, the ideas can be expanded to composting of organic waste and responsible tourism," says Julian.

This is what happened at Pulau Tioman last year. In conjunction with the International Coastal Cleanup Day, 35 students from Sekolah Rendah Kebangsaan Tekek participated in a programme to clean up Tekek beach. Some 75 kg of trash was collected, segregated and recycled.

This year, RCM has already done some groundwork for this plastic recycling programme at Pulau Mantanani.

"My guys in KK (Kota Kinabalu) have just finished conducting educational programmes," shares Julian. "They have gone to schools and explained what we're going to do, talked to the ketua kampung (village head), supplied them with bins and done what we can. The only way all this is going to work is if it's self-sustaining. We

need to collect enough rubbish to see to it that it covers the salaries of all the people involved in the programme."

CIMB Foundation is providing a baling machine to compress the plastic waste which will then be transported to the mainland and sent for recycling. Once the programme is launched, RCM island-based staff will continue to collect and recycle plastic, working with resorts and volunteer programmes. Hopefully, this will lead to establishing a more comprehensive waste management programme on the island.

Slowly, they'll have to extend the waste they collect to include aluminium, glass and paper to generate multiple revenue streams.

Will it all work? Julian's answer is simple: "I'm not sure, but someone has to try." Taking a deep breath, he reiterates why he's working on these projects. "Because it needs to be done."

Details at www.reefcheck.org.my



Sea Fan in Tioman. On the left, Julian Hyde, general manager of Reef Check Malaysia.

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