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COASTAL MARINE CONSERVATION

Is the polluted tide finally a changin'?



Attendees at the Coastal Marine Conservation event Photo: Papichaya L.

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On Thursday, July 19 a huge wave of plastic washed up on the shoreline of the Dominican Republic covering the entire beach at Playa Montesinos. As a result, more than 30 tons of plastic waste was collected from the area.

If nothing is done there will be more plastics (by weight) in the ocean than fish by 2050.

As an island habitat that also thrives on the tourism industry, the health of our local coastal marine ecosystems affect us all. As individuals we are more aware than ever of the detrimental effect of modern growing economies' dependency on plastics and their environmental impact. The media tends to present a dark view with shocking statistics that make us throw in the towel on the entire gloomy affair. Guilty as charged. But for once they're right. They really don't need to exaggerate the environmental issue to induce the public reaction and a sense of responsibility across all sectors from government to business, to local communities.

But before you turn the page in despair, let me inform you that I am the bearer of glad tidings. This, for once, is a positive report on environmental impact

in action. Of groups of local academics and commercial companies working hand-in-hand to bring about change for good.

Last Friday (July 20) the Phuket Marriott Resort & Spa, Merlin Beach, hosted a full day of presentations and workshops on promoting best practices in coastal marine conservation. The event was well attended by conservation groups, government agencies and local hoteliers. The day was presented in collaboration with the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN), Mangroves for the Future (MFF) and the Department of Marine and Coastal Resources, who are working with and bringing together a consortium of government and commercial partners to drive corporate social responsibility (CSR) across coastal business practices.

Regeneration of Coral Reefs

The day began with a Reef Ecosystems talk by Dr Naline Thongtham from the Phuket Marine Biological Center. This is one of five research centers across Thailand. The centre covers a regional coastline of approximately 900 kilometres in which they look after monitoring marine ecology, oceanography and pollution in the sea, study of plankton and ocean productivity. Their work also includes conservation of endangered species such as sea turtles and whale groups, and

reference collections of ocean fauna and flora.

Their study on the impact of human and natural causes on the coral reefs and its rehabilitation along the Andaman Sea has been ongoing for more than 20 years. This area alone is over 120 square kilometres, and it won't surprise you to learn that the condition is not currently healthy. In the report only 6% was deemed to be of good status, with the rest described as either in a poor or very poor health.

Most of the problem lies in human activity including poor management and the dramatic increase in tourism in recent decades.

Tree-felling from coastal development is also a key component. By cutting trees in the coastal regions, the rainfall then brings land sediment from the hills down into the sea. Coral simply cannot survive under a blanket of sediment.

Dr Niphon Phongsuwan of the Department of Marine and Coastal Resources (DMCR), added that the sediment problem was not in the control of the hotels, but rather a Government sector issue, who need to work closely together with the IUCN to step up its environmental policy.

This has led to the publication of the Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) report. The problem is clear, it is the enforcement of policy to prevent

sediment fall that is the issue. Dr Niphon advised that the authorities need to plan a holding tank or trap system when areas near the beach are under construction to prevent loading of sediment into the sea.

There is, however, one new regulation by the DMCR that can make an immediate impact. It is now law that with any reporting to the department of activity that directly causes damage to a reef, they are now obliged to follow legal action.

Dr Naline discussed the team's work on coral rehabilitation. The center places man-made concrete artificial structures into the ocean environment that enable the coral to attach, grow and bloom in a stable environment. After 15 years it has proven to significantly increase coral recovery that works in many locations. The structures can also be moved to rehabilitate other areas.

Hotels can do a lot by promoting environmentally friendly guidelines. How guests can enjoy the reef in a good way. Ideally hotels could help by designing guides to their local reefs, with information on best practices for snorkeling and not to step on the coral at low tide. The Marriott Merlin Beach has a resident Marine Biologist, Katie Binson from IUCN, as well as a beachfront Reef Education Center for guests.

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Breakout sessions explore new approaches to tackling plastic pollution Photo: Papichaya L.



Jane Macdougall from the Phuket Hotel Association discusses sustainable solutions Photo: Papichaya L.

Biodiversity is not a choice

“Thailand is one of six nations responsible for 60% of sea plastic pollution.”

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To support hotels on best practices IUCN has produced a Hotel Guideline Document, ‘Biodiversity: My Hotel in Action’, which can be download online.

Thailand Business and Biodiversity Platform

Ann Moey, Head of Communications and private sector focal point for the Asia Regional Office of IUCN then spoke about their role with commercial industries.

The IUCN is the World’s largest environment network. Their mission statement is to create ‘A just world that values and conserves nature.’

Core to their work with industry in Thailand is the Bio-Diversity Network Alliance (B-DNA), which is a first in this region. It is a multi-stakeholder platform which aims to bring companies together to protect life below water and on land in line with Thailand’s specific biodiversity. The programme aims to mobilise the private sector with knowledge and tools, as well as to facilitate collaboration to enhance projects and effort.

Ms Moey claimed that Thailand is one of six countries responsible for 60% of sea plastic pollution.

Corporate responsibility is key. Ms Moey described three important areas to engage these partners from philanthropy and charitable donation, risk management including beach cleaning and waste, to value creation where businesses understand the beneficial impact of adopting sustainable practices and environmental policies. Businesses can gain accreditation and consumer recognition for being a responsible sustainable business, which in turn has a positive impact commercially.

Ms Moey believes there is a desire across industry to adopt suitable practices. What they need is the knowledge on how to do it and the ability to reinforce and sustain a programme of change.

So how do we know that influencing businesses and a programme of corporate sustainability like B-DNA actually works? The IUCN has already established these platform in other countries including India, Sri Lanka & Pakistan. In India core members such as TATA Power have produced biodiversity development plans with the help of IUCN.

“Biodiversity is not a choice anymore,” explained Ms Moey. “The Thailand B-DNA will enable members to collaborate with the government and influence policy. It’s about national priorities where members can learn from one another and appreciate the recognition for being a responsible sustainable business.”

Tackling Plastic Waste

Jayne Macdougall works in the industry but also heads up the Phuket Hotel Association, which is a non-profit organisation representing 70 hotels. That’s a whopping 10,755 rooms across the island.

The association gives video and training modules on best practices and supplier initiatives to the resorts.

Key to this is the reduction of single-use plastics which include bottles, straws and take away containers.

The message that we have to hear loud and clear is that small change DOES work, and can make a dramatic impact on the environment. Twelve months



Ann Moey from IUCN talks about the B-DNA programme Photo: Papichaya L.

ago 29 Phuket hotels used single-use plastics. Now that has dropped to 20. Reduced by 9? Not much you think. When you consider that one hotel alone represents 660,000 plastic bottles in one year the impact starts to become a little clearer.

Dr Marissa Jablonski also attended as an expert in this field from the US. The academic is a development engineer and educator who collaborates with trans-disciplinary groups worldwide wrestling with sustainability and is on the island for two months conducting a survey of plastics in hotels. She detailed that there are a lot of questions back from hotels and a strong need to ensure they have knowledge on best practices.

Dr Jablonski infomed us all that when you recycle a drinking water bottle, it will never become another water bottle. It will most likely come back as a polyester for clothing items. When you consider that worldwide one million plastic bottles are used in every minute of every day... that’s a lot of itchy jumpers.

Simply by using glass bottles and paper straws we can all get closer to a sustainable tourism and local community. Not only this, hotels can actually save cost by using glass rather than plastic. It’s a great story in itself. Hotels can do the right thing, as well as have an economic motivation to use local and sustainable alternatives.

So how can we make a difference?

For hotels, 2018 is the International Year of the Reef. There is a global effort to increase awareness and understanding of values and threats to local marine

environments, as well as reef watch training in Phuket.

Contacting the IUCN for support, information and supplier lists of sustainable alternatives is an important first step, and their ‘Biodiversity: My hotel in action’ report can be downloaded online at their website.

For the individual, check out the ‘Trash Hero’ programme. This is run entirely by volunteers driving sustainable community-based projects, and looking for all to lend a hand. There are local chapters of the group that organise waste clear ups and bottle programmes. Trash Hero Thailand has a regional Facebook page for further information on how to get involved.

We all know Thailand has a long way to go. The over use of unnecessary plastics is inherent in practically every encounter between a purchaser and the seller across the nation. And as I described the event to one hotel owner in Phuket later that evening it was met with a disappointing, but perhaps understandable skepticism.

Regardless we must press forward, educate and change. If only to create small changes one step at a time.

But remember, this is how all revolutions begin.

Key Links:

IUCN - <https://www.iucn.org/asia/thailand/countries/thailand>

Biodiversity: My hotel in action - https://cmsdata.iucn.org/downloads/iucn_hotel_guide_final.pdf

Trash Hero Thailand - <https://www.facebook.com/trashherothailand/>