



Beautiful and beastly beaches

Waves crashing upon the shore bring with them a load of rubbish, marring the beauty of our beaches, affecting our quality of life and creating hazards for marine creatures

The first leg of Paddle for Nature raises the question of what we want to leave as our legacy

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ON A quiet stretch of coastline, the white sand is untouched, a powdery swathe of smoothness from the water's edge as far as the eye can see. Nearby, cliffs rising out of the sea paint a dramatically beautiful landscape, dotted – as if by an artist – with a majestic eagle soaring in an updraft in search of its meal. This is the ideal of the Malaysian shore, of perfect beaches fringed by coconut trees and lapped by azure water.

Just a few kilometres farther, though, it's a different story. Where the waves crash upon the shore, there is a line. A line of garbage, made up of plastic bottles, disposable diapers, empty snack packets, glass containers, random orphaned slippers, straws, cups; a veritable detritus of modern life. This is the reality of the Malaysian shore, of tonnes of waste washing up from a disposable lifestyle.

This isn't just a local problem. The garbage has come via local streams and rivers, castoffs from on-the-water residences and vessels as well as beach activities, but also as bobbing bits of flotsam and jetsam from around the world. This was highlighted just this year during the search for the possible wreckage of MH370, when rescue groups reported that the amount of garbage in the Indian Ocean was hampering efforts to detect the airplane.

Then there are the slicks and balls of oils dumped by seagoing vessels, and also the wash of food and sanitation waste directly from households and ships into the sea. What you can't see really can't bother you. Unless it drifts up as huge stretches of stink.

The garbage situation here, as noted by the Malaysian Nature Society (MNS) Paddle for Nature project on marine conservation, is

not yet as critical as other places, but we could be getting there fast. And that's not even considering the fact that marine debris is also dangerous to animals, which can become entangled in them, cut, drowned or slowed down, while heavy pieces can damage reefs and other habitats for marine creatures. This will in turn affect our quality of life, and the lives of people who depend on the oceans for a living.

And seeing as Malaysians rarely congregate on the coastline, aside from those small coastal communities and holiday makers, Paddle for Nature is one way in which the message on marine conservation can be delivered to the masses, says MNS Marine Conservation Manager and project head Faedzul Rahman. And the method? Kayaking along the Peninsular Malaysia coast while collating information on the conditions as well as engaging with the public, the relevant authorities and local heroes who are trying to make a difference in their little corner of the world.

Starting on 9th September 2014 in Pengkalan Kubor, Kelantan, the first phase of the journey has covered some 500km to Pekan, Pahang, taking in the East Coast's renowned beaches and holiday destinations. And the reality is that vast stretches of the coastline are marred by marine debris.

Faedzul says humankind's need for convenience, and ignorance, are largely to blame. "Most of the garbage is made of plastic, which is highly desirable because of its ease of use. Plastic bags to carry your things in, polystyrene containers for your takeaway food, plastic bottles, everything gets used and thrown away because they are cheap or free. We even found disposable diapers on the beach. In some areas, people



The Paddle for Nature kayak is equipped with Google Street View Trekker, the first in the world for this mode of transport. For more info on how this camera system can help save nature, go to:



www.paddlefornature.weebly.com

also discard big items, such as television sets and fridges, into the sea, because it is too 'inconvenient' to cart them to a proper disposal site.

"People have been treating the ocean, and other bodies of water, as a huge dump site since time immemorial. It is this ignorance that is coming back to haunt us now."

And part of Paddle for Nature's purpose, he says, is the engagement to spread the word about not making this, a world of destroyed oceans, our legacy. On its journey, the project's solo kayaker, Hari Raju, and crew have met fishermen, villagers, coastal resort owners and local authorities, as well as the public at an event in Teluk Cempedak, Kuantan, which also encouraged children to learn about the ocean and the beautiful things that live in it.

"We also met with some local heroes, for example the Pewanis project in Setiu that is working with WWF-Malaysia to help women make a living while still protecting nature, turtle sanctuaries helping to keep turtles from extinction and an eco-tourism operator in Cherating that seeks to educate and entertain in equal measure," Faedzul says.

As to direct involvement in conservation efforts, Paddle for Nature planted mangrove saplings at the MNS ecoCare environmental education centre in Kerteh, Terengganu and



Direct action in the protection of Malaysia's coastline means getting hands and feet dirty planting trees, especially with mangrove saplings, as seen at far left at the MNS ecoCare Centre in Kerteh. At left, paddler Hari Raju tends to a just-planted Rhu in Sungai Ular, Cherating as part of an exercise with the Forestry Department

assisted the Forestry Department in planting Rhu (*Casuarina equisetifolia*) saplings in Kampung Sungai Ular, Cherating, the first of five tree-planting events planned around the country throughout Paddle for Nature's journey to Langkawi. This tree-planting exercise is important as these trees are endemic to the coastline and mitigate some of the damage to the coast caused by wind and wave.

The first phase of Paddle for Nature ended at Pekan in October, and the second phase started in November in southern Johor, skipping over the southeast for the moment owing to the onset of the monsoon season. Phase Two will take the team all the way to Perlis' border with Thailand and on to the finishing point in Langkawi.

"We hope that there will be more opportunities for us to meet with all kinds of people as the second phase continues, especially as we are now undertaking relay kayaking with the participation of members of MNS and KPA for Youth, which is an extension of MNS's programme involving schools around the country," Faedzul says.

The fact that the paddlers and crew will be made up of volunteers is also significant, he adds, as it means more people are learning about the country's wondrous marine heritage and taking the first steps towards its conservation.

"We talk the talk, we walk the walk, and now we paddle the paddle," he says with a laugh. "But we hope to succeed in this task, telling humankind that the ocean is not a rubbish disposal site, changing our perceptions, altering our lifestyles, and leaving a legacy of beautiful beaches that can be enjoyed by our children and their children after them."



Top: MNS Terengganu member Joyce Chuah, who volunteered as a Paddle for Nature ground crew, meets with participants of the Pewanis project with WWF-Malaysia in Setiu

Above: Paddle for Nature presents a pennant to Pak Su of Rimbun Dahan Turtle Hatchery for his tireless efforts in protecting marine turtles, which makes him a "local hero" in our books

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- Contribute to marine conservation. If you can't physically help, do support the project financially via the Donate a Kilometre fund. With a minimum contribution of RM10 per km (individual) and RM500 per km (corporation), you will be helping each stroke the volunteer paddlers take and ensure that attention will be paid to our ocean treasures for years to come. Visit our official website and click on the "Donation" page on how you can make a difference from the comfort of your home