

Ocean plastic waste knocks on corporate doorsteps

By **Jonathan L. Mayuga**
October 1, 2017



In Photo: Greenpeace volunteers comb the coastal area of Freedom Island in Parañaque City during the coastal-cleanup activity at the boundary of Las Piñas and Parañaque City.

‘It’s fun. I’ve learned a lot from this,’ shared Janine Rose Ruado, 21, of Aroma, Tondo, Manila, about the coastal cleanup organized by Greenpeace Philippines on Freedom Island in Parañaque City.

Back home, she said, garbage is a common sight and their community is exposed to the ills of garbage pollution.

“I will tell my neighbors of what I’ve learned...about the importance of keeping our community and our ocean clean,” she told the BusinessMirror in an interview on September 20, the last day of the 10-day cleanup.

Janine was the youngest of close to 100 volunteers who joined the activity as part of the International Coastal Cleanup Day.

Ironically, Janine’s community, called “Aroma”, which means a distinctively, typically pleasant smell, is anything but pleasant.

A housing project in Tondo, Aroma stinks of garbage as it is near a dumpsite called Happyland. It is just one of many in Metro Manila, some of which are along Manila Bay, which is often the subject of coastal cleanup conducted every year.

The Freedom Island, which forms part of the Las Pinas-Parañaque Critical Habitat and Ecotourism Area (LPPCHEA), is a known staging ground of hundreds of migratory waterfowl and other migratory bird species that visit the Philippines.

A protected area, LPPCHEA has been declared as a wetland of international importance under the Ramsar Convention, an international treaty of which the Philippines is a signatory.

Incidentally, the Philippines will play host to the 12th United Nations’s Conference of Parties on the Convention on Conservation of Migratory Species of Wild Animals (CMS) this October.

An international treaty, CMS also called the Bonn Convention, highlights the threat to migratory wild animals, including marine mammals that are threatened with extinction because of factors that include ocean plastic pollution.

Plastic pollution

This year environmental groups have decided to level up the campaign against ocean plastic pollution and came knocking at the doorsteps of the corporate world.

Together with other groups under the Break Free from Plastic Pollution Movement, Greenpeace conducted a brand audit to name the companies that contribute the most to plastic pollution of oceans in the Philippines.

At a news conference in Quezon City on September 22, Greenpeace and other members of the Break Free from Plastic Pollution said plastic containers of products produced by Nestlé, Unilever and Indonesian company PT Torabika Mayora are the top 3 contributors of plastic waste hauled by volunteers from Freedom Islands, contributing to the estimated 1.88 million metric tons of mismanaged-plastic wastes in the Philippines per year.

The Philippines is the third-biggest source of plastic pollution as corporations lock the Philippines into cheap, disposable plastics, Greenpeace said.

The coastal cleanup gathered all sorts of garbage—ranging from styrofoam to footwear along with single-use plastics, such as bags, bottles and straws.

A total of 54,260 pieces of plastic waste was collected during the audit, topped by product sachets.

Level up campaign

Von Hernandez, global coordinator of Break Free from Plastic Pollution, said the coastal cleanup was conducted on several zones on Freedom Island. At the

same time, an audit of the brands of the plastics gathered by volunteers was also conducted. About 70 sacks were collected on the first day.

While the cleanup targets not only plastics, most of those collected were single-use plastics.

“[Coastal] cleanups [are held] on a regular basis. It is a yearly event yet the problem keeps recurring and [is] actually getting worse. In fact, one day after the cleanup, we came back to find more [garbage] than [when] we started,” Hernandez said.

“The reason for the brand audit is to really surface the brands. Whether they like or not, these corporations or manufacturing companies are part of the problem,” Hernandez said.

He said the narrative being pushed by industries is that the problem of ocean pollution is due to inadequate waste management and blaming it to the public or consumer behavior.

“We want to look at the responsibility of these corporations,” he said.

‘Sachet economy’

According to Greenpeace, developing countries, such as the Philippines, run on a “sachet economy,” which encourages the practice of buying Fast Moving Consumer Goods in small quantities.

It drives market and profit share for most companies by making it more accessible to people with limited incomes.

Unfortunately, Greenpeace lamented that low-value single-use sachets are not collected by waste pickers and usually end up in landfills or scattered indiscriminately as litter in the streets or in waterways.

Third-worst polluter of oceans

Currently, Greenpeace said the Philippines ranks as the third-worst polluter of the world's oceans, with China as No. 1.

In a study, China, Indonesia, the Philippines, Thailand, Vietnam and Malaysia are on the list of top 10 countries with mismanaged plastic waste. According to Greenpeace, Asean countries, due to their lengthy coastlines and high plastic usage, are among the primary sources of plastic waste that adversely affect the so-called blue economy, or economic activity in the maritime sector.

The Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation estimates its cost to the tourism, fishing and shipping industries was \$1.2 billion in the region alone, according to Greenpeace.

Food and personal health-care packaging

Ephraim Batungbacal, Regional Oceans research coordinator of Greenpeace, said a brand audit revealed that food packaging, personal-care products and household products comprised the bulk of the garbage collected by the volunteers during the coastal cleanup. Batungbacal represents Greenpeace Southeast Asia, particularly in Thailand, Indonesia and the Philippines.

“Every year we conduct cleanup but nobody seems to tell who is doing it,” he said.

Corporate accountability

Through the brand audit, Greenpeace hopes that the manufacturers and producers will initiate action, starting with a dialogue with environmental groups to develop a solution to the problem, he said.

“We are hoping that the officials of these companies will respond and initiate a dialogue. If it doesn’t happen, we will write them. We are not here to pick a fight. We are here to develop solutions. We believe that corporations are part of the solution. We are just putting in the figures in a visually obvious problem,” he added.

Most of those collected, he said, are single-use plastics, many of which are plastic sachets used for the packaging of coffee, milk, shampoo and other personal-care product.

Nestlé, Unilever response

The companies identified as major contributors to plastic pollution welcomed the criticism and vowed to address the concerns raised against their use of single-use plastics for packaging.

Nestlé and Unilever responded to the report through press statements issued to a select media institutions. The statements said they are looking for alternative solutions to improve their packaging, recognizing the environmental impact of single-use plastics.

Greenpeace had sent letters to the three top contributors to the plastic pollution on Freedom Islands before making the public announcement of the result of the brand audit on September 22.

Greenpeace communication officer Angelica Pago told the BusinessMirror through the social media that none of the three made a formal reply to their invitation.

Nestlé, instead, sent a representative to meet with Greenpeace campaigners on the same day.

“All their answers were coursed through the media. Last Friday Nestlé met with our campaigner, but they only presented their 2020 sustainability targets,” she said.

Abigail Aguilar, Greenpeace campaigner in charge of the brand-audit campaign, said: “We will continue to engage with them [companies], stressing that our stand is in reduction at source. And that we expect a concrete action plan from them detailing how they plan to reduce their plastic packaging.”

Different 3Rs

According to Batungbacal, leveling up the campaign shifts from the 3Rs (reduce, reuse and recycle) to another 3Rs—refuse, return then reduce.

“3Rs, which is reduce, reuse and recycle, is a thing of the past. It should now be refuse—as much as possible, don’t accept plastic. It is our responsibility as consumers. We should refuse single-use plastic and pick products in containers that are recyclable.”

Reduce, he said, simply means reduce the waste being produced. In the Philippines, he said, companies do not have a deposit-return scheme unlike in Europe.

Extended producer responsibility

According to Batungbacal, manufacturers should bear in mind the so-called extended producer responsibility, which, unfortunately, is not available in the Philippines for single-use plastics.

Bottling companies encourage consumers to pay a deposit for the bottles and they will get it back upon return. Bottles, however, are recyclable, unlike plastic sachet and other single-use plastics that are causing the problem. In developed countries, manufacturers have deposit-return schemes for single-use plastics wherein the consumers are paid for the packaging they return.

“The extended producer responsibility states that the companies should be responsible for the products they are producing. Since they know that consumers discard single-use plastic that contributes to ocean plastic pollution, they should look for an alternative to single-use plastic. They should have the initiative,” he said.

Global problem

Michael Meyer-Krotz, a campaigner of Greenpeace based in Hamburg, Germany, who joined the coastal cleanup on Freedom Island, said ocean plastic pollution is a global problem.

Plastic pollution, he said, can be seen even in the Arctic and smaller islands in the North Sea.

“In Germany lots of effort is exerted to deal with single-use plastics and only 40 percent are recycled and 60 percent is burned. Even in countries that call themselves economically developed, we have problems dealing with single-use plastic,” he said.

Extraordinary

In the Philippines, he said, the global problem of plastic is extraordinary visible.

“Here, all the plastic is polluting the paradise. This is a wonderful area. And you can see it. Every morning we come here and do the cleanup and come back the following morning and the garbage is still there,” he lamented.

This, he said, is a realization that the problem of ocean plastic pollution cannot be solved by cleanups.

“We have to stop it at the source. This is crucial,” he said. “You produce small plastic and throw them away. This is really stupid.”

Greenpeace, he said, will campaign for companies to develop alternatives to single-use plastics as packaging materials, and for the government to phase-out single-use plastics once and for all. “We want to contradict the myth of single-use plastic is cheap. Because you have to do cleanups and pay for all the cleanups,” he said.

He lamented that manufacturing industries are accustomed to producing single-use plastics for packaging materials and bringing it to countries like the Philippines that cannot deal with the problem they create.

He said it is high time that packaging industries should do it the other way around by taking back the problem and be more responsible in doing the business and, hopefully, help end the global problem of ocean plastic pollution.

Image Credits: Jonathan L. Mayuga

<https://businessmirror.com.ph/ocean-plastic-waste-knocks-on-corporate-doorsteps>