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Combating ocean plastic pollution

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6 MINUTE READ



Plastic waste

Ocean plastic pollution has reached an alarming level that environmental groups have started a global brand audit, targeting manufacturers whose products' packaging materials end up in rivers and oceans.

The clamor is to hold the manufacturers accountable for their plastic packaging materials, particularly single-use plastics, which scientists say end up not only polluting the oceans.

As plastics are non-biodegradable, the longer they stay in the oceans, they become deadlier when they breakdown into smaller pieces and become microplastics and become part of the food chain, contaminating food and eventually threatening human health and survival.

Mismanaged plastic

The “World Bank Group 2021 Market Study for the Philippines: Plastics Circularity Opportunities and Barriers. East Asia and Pacific Region Marine Plastics Series” revealed that mismanaged plastic waste has growing economic and environmental consequences.

The study says that \$80 billion to \$120 billion worth of plastic packaging is lost from the global economy each year due to lack of recycling and suboptimal value creation where recycling exists.

The study revealed that globally, between 4.8 million to 12.7 million tons of plastic leak into the oceans each year with Asia contributing over 80 percent.

“The Philippines is the third-largest contributor with an estimated 0.75 million metric tons of mismanaged plastic entering the ocean every year,” the study said.

The World Bank Group also revealed that the Department of Environment and Natural Resources (DENR), with the support of the United Nations Development Programme, is finalizing the National Plan of Action for Marine Litter.

Ban ‘problematic’ plastic

Last month, environmental groups have filed a petition in Congress seeking to immediately regulate, if not ban, the “problematic single-use plastic packaging and products” in the Philippines.

The groups are the Break Free From Plastic, EcoWaste Coalition, Global Alliance for Incinerator Alternatives, Greenpeace Philippines, Health Care Without Harm Asia, Mother Earth Foundation, Oceana Philippines International, Interfacing Development Interventions for Sustainability, Philippine Movement for Climate Justice.

Project Mariknows, War on Waste Negros Oriental, Youth Advocates for Climate Action Philippines, Sea and Terrestrial Environment Protectors, Freedom from Debt Coalition Cebu, Sanlakas Cebu, Kabataan Party-list, Panalipdan Youth Davao, Philippine Earth Justice Center, and 350.org Pilipinas

More than 57,000 individuals signed the petition which the proponents said “reflect on the citizens’ clamor for the passage of a comprehensive law banning single-use plastics.”

The groups are calling for an immediate timeline for the phasing out of single-use plastic products consistent with Republic Act (RA) 9003, or the Ecological Solid Waste Management Act of 2001, and RA 8749, or Clean Air Act.

They said it should focus on sustainable systems and reusability of products, and mandate producers to cut-back on the use of single-use plastic.

Different perspective

One organization, however, is looking at the ocean plastic pollution problem from a different perspective.

The Save Philippine Seas (SPS), a movement that help protect the country's coastal and marine resources, is embarking on a nationwide campaign to help change the negative perception on plastic, and focus on the issue of poor solid waste management.

Together with snacks company Mondelez Philippines, SPS aims to shed light on the issues around solid waste management and advocating for accountability from all relevant stakeholders.

"In the case of marine plastic pollution, we see the reasons behind it are improper waste management and unsustainable consumption patterns," said SPS Executive Director Ana Oposa said in a statement announcing the partnership with Mondelez Philippines.

"Simply put, plastics are not being disposed of and collected properly, leading them to end up in nature. When they are collected, they are not recycled enough, which leads them to stay in landfills and end up in bodies of water too. Lastly, we need to treat plastic as a resource... Plastic can and should be re-used to reduce the production of virgin plastic, reduce the waste in our landfills, and eliminate the plastics in our environment," Oposa said.

SPS developed a white paper on the issue surrounding the plastic problem and the poor solid waste management in the country. It urged to promote plastic circularity and educate various stakeholders, including consumers and policymakers, on the complex issue at hand.

A complex issue

Interviewed by the BusinessMirror via Zoom on August 19, Oposa, also known as SPS's "Chief Mermaid," said that plastic is a complex issue. There are a lot of problems.

“A lot of packaging we use right now are not recyclable and not being collected,” she said, even if there’s a law, RA 9003, that was passed 21 years ago.

“We need to work to ensure that the law is implemented,” according to Oposa, adding that even among nongovernment organizations the education and knowledge on solid waste management remain wanting.

“Even me, when I buy a product, where will I throw this [packaging], especially if they are [made of] mixed materials?” she asked.

She said that a lot of the products and materials that enter the Philippines come from Western countries like the United States.

“So we really want to create more materials that we can relate to and specific to the Philippine audience,” she said.

Plastic ban a bane?

SPS’s white paper on Promoting Plastic Circularity in the Philippines casts doubt on the wisdom of banning plastic which several local government units have adapted.

According to SPS, banning a material without sustainable alternatives can bring a different set of problems.

She cited that the use of paper is more resource-intensive than disposable bags, and would require more land use from growing trees, water and more carbon dioxide emissions.

SPS cited a study by Denmark's Ministry of Environment and Food that found that a paper bag must be reused 43 times and an organic cotton bag 20,000 times to be equal or less than the per-use environment impact of a disposable plastic bag.

Fundamental shift

The white paper requires a fundamental shift in production and consumption—from a linear economy to a circular economy that will require behavioral change.

SPS said it is committed to embark on an inclusive education campaign that promotes behavioral change, in, among others, waste segregation and recyclability of different material types.

The document talked about implementing the garbage law, which is anchored on segregation at source, and no-segregation, no-collection policy, which will hopefully enable better compliance of the provisions of the law.

Moreover, the paper underscored the need to strengthen the recycling industry in the Philippines.

Recycle-ready packaging

According to Joseph R. Fabul, Mondelez Philippines country manager, said the company aims to make recycle-ready all of the company's packaging materials by 2025.

"Right now, we are 94 percent recycle-ready," he said.

According to Fabul, plastic per se is not bad. “It only becomes bad if it is not recyclable and if it is not being collected, recycled, or processed. That is what we are trying to avoid. We are avoiding this bad plastic going to the sea,” he said.

He said the company is investing in infrastructure, he said, because there are consumer plastic waste that are already collected, but still end up in water bodies.

Information dissemination

Mondelez, a member of the Philippine Alliance for Recycling Materials Sustainability, boasts of a plan for the campaign’s success.

“We have a target of zero waste to nature by 2030. So by 2030, no waste will end up in our oceans and nature. Throughout this timeline, we plan to execute several key interventions, and one is through education,” Fabul said.

He said that with the help of SPS, infographics will be circulated internally, and then through social media.

“So the kids can easily learn from it. It is attractive for the kids—the good habit of recycling and knowledge that this plastic waste can end up in our oceans... Social media is such a powerful tool and the slides are designed for social media, such as Instagram,” he said.

According to Fabul, the company has earlier planned to print the materials for distribution, but this move was made difficult by the Covid-19 pandemic.

Nevertheless, he said the policy paper is for a wide range of audience, including members of Congress and other government agencies.

“This is also to disseminate information about the real problem,” he said.

Image courtesy of BFFP/Ecowaste Coalition

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