



# ASEAN Conference on Reducing Marine Debris in ASEAN Region

22-23<sup>rd</sup> November 2017

JW Marriott Phuket Resort & Spa

The ASEAN Conference on Reducing Marine Debris in ASEAN Region, organised by the Ministry of Natural Resources and Environment of Thailand in coordination with the ASEAN Secretariat and IUCN, was held on the 22-23<sup>rd</sup> November 2017 in Phuket, Thailand. Over 250 participants, including attendees from ASEAN Member States, international conservation groups, government partners, researchers and local community members, gathered to discuss marine debris pollution and methods to address this urgent, growing issue.

The Conference reviewed the current status of marine debris pollution on local, regional, and global scales, and sought to exchange information on the most effective methods for addressing debris that already exists in the oceans, as well as preventing further leakage into the environment. Collaborating to reduce marine debris directly complements the UN Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 14, Life Below Water. Through identifying gaps and challenges, the national governments, local municipalities and private sector can work together to create innovative solutions.

## **A Regional and Global Issue**

During the morning's opening ceremony, H.E. Vongthep Arthakaivalee, Deputy Secretary General of ASEAN, underlined the urgent need to address the issue of marine debris in the region. "It is important to note that the top 20 countries ranked by size of mismanaged plastic waste include six ASEAN member States. Marine debris pollution is therefore a regional concern to ASEAN which will require regional action," he concluded.

Asia has recently experienced a rapid growth in plastic production and use. Though the per capita use may be lower than in other regions, there is a severe lack of adequate management, amplifying the need for a solution. Because the environmental costs of plastic are not internalized, it is seen as a material that is artificially cheap; as it degrades the environment, there is a long-term drain on the economy. Current governance strategies and instruments provide a fragmented approach that does not adequately address marine litter and microplastics. The COBSEA Regional Action Plan on Marine Litter 2008 aims to address this shortfall in the region, with signatories including Cambodia, China, Indonesia, Korea, Malaysia, Philippines, Singapore, Thailand and China. Five of the top ten global marine polluters are ASEAN member countries, making this a pressing issue in the region. A future ASEAN-China Conference on Reducing Marine Debris in the South China Sea has been proposed for 2018, followed by an ASEAN-China Workshop on Best Practices for Reducing Marine Debris in the South China Sea in 2019.

Foreign embassy representatives are also collaborating with ASEAN countries to reduce marine debris. The United States Embassy, is supporting innovation in materials and design, changes in consumer behaviour, and improve waste management in the region. The Swedish Embassy is committed to SDG 14, Life Underwater, and led the first UN Global Ocean Conference with Fiji. They are working towards creating a robust, regulatory framework to address waste in the oceans. The Norwegian government is working to launch a 150 million Kronor project on marine litter in Southeast Asia, and has pledged to support Indonesia in reducing the production and use of plastics and better manage waste. The cooperation of ASEAN nations, coupled with support from more developed nations, is essential to address this global issue.

Legally, the 1982 United National Convention on the Law of the Sea, which has been signed by all ASEAN countries, except for Cambodia, declares that all states have the obligation to conserve the

marine environment, and must take measures to preserve the seas, including taking measures to reduce land-based pollution. The failure to cooperate can provide a legal case; therefore the enforcement of laws agreements already in place could be a useful means of addressing marine waste.

### **National Policies and Initiatives**

In Thailand, the current average municipal solid waste generated per individual is 1.14 kg per day. In coastal areas 12% of the total waste is plastic, totalling 339,000 tons per year, 16% of which is plastic bags. To address this, Thailand has created the National Solid Waste and Hazardous Waste Management Master Plan, which encourages citizens to reduce waste at the source by following the principles of reduce, reuse, recycle, and establishing proper disposal methods for municipal solid waste and household hazardous waste, using centralized facilities. In addition, the Department of Marine and Coastal Resources (DMCR) has conducted coastal research on marine pollution and found that coastal areas differ in the types of marine debris issues they face. The Department has campaigned to stop using plastic cap seals on water bottles and to establish smoke free beaches to reduce waste in the seas.

On the issue of plastic bags, China initiated a plastic bag ban in 2008, reducing the usage of plastic bags by over two-thirds. This could serve as a useful case study for Thailand and other ASEAN nations in addressing single-use plastics. China has also established the Marine Debris and Microplastic Research Centre, which holds public education and volunteer activities and fosters international cooperation with initiatives including World Oceans Day and the International Coastal Cleaning Day.

### **Inspiring Innovation**

During the afternoon sessions, participants were divided into two groups, with one focusing on management and policy solutions and the other pertaining to innovative solutions and technologies. The innovative solutions group heard from heads of the private and public sector, who are interested in moving towards cleaner oceans. The private sector representatives suggested a material flow analysis (MFA) be conducted to assess the flow and stock of plastics within the system, and the results used to stop plastic leakage into the environment. Creating a Thailand Waste Management Master Plan would set up a single organization responsible for the entire waste management system, allowing for clearer procedures to be enacted.

Speaking with neighbouring countries is also an essential way to learn effective practices. It was suggested that ASEAN countries mimic the more circular plastic economies such as those in Singapore and Japan, allowing them to reduce waste leakage and reuse it in production. Bangladesh was the first country in the world to successfully ban single use plastic bags; they found that they were clogging drains and leading to the flooding of cities.

Most landfills in Southeast Asia are running full, and the creation of new landfills is a costly endeavour. By training residents in source segregation, Depok, a city in greater Jakarta, diverted 76 tons of waste from landfills, reducing municipal costs and relocating tons of food waste to compost facilities, repurposing it as rich soil for gardening. In India, there is a large informal sector that works as waste pickers, and some groups have found that it is essential to engage waste pickers to support waste separation. High quality plastic waste removed from landfills can later be repurposed to build roads and chairs that are needed in the community. Upcycling the Oceans, an initiative supported by PTT has been working to reclaim plastics from the ocean and uses them to make clothes. Innovative uses for recycled plastic continue to evolve, and by sharing these ideas we can make plastic waste a valuable commodity.

The second parallel session focused on management and policy solutions to marine debris. Because the nature of the ocean is borderless, there must be strong political commitment from all nations to effectively address this issue. Indonesia wants to reduce waste by 30% in total, and is aiming to specifically reduce marine debris by up to 70%. They have found that instituting a fee for plastic bags is an effective and easy way to reduce their usage. Trash Hero, a four year old non-profit that organises community beach cleanups now has chapters around the world and is using its platform to clean up plastics that have

already entered the environment, and to educate people and change their plastic usage habits. Grassroots groups can be an effective way to give agency to local stakeholders and address issues in their communities. All speakers agreed that starting with a few important issues was a much more attainable method to manage a widespread waste issue.

To effectively address regional marine waste, ASEAN member states must work together to share best practices and those that were not as effective. It is only through multiple stakeholder collaboration and communication that the region can successfully stop plastic debris from entering the global oceans.