

plastic revolution

Sometimes it takes something shocking to happen for us to sit up and take notice of an on-going or escalating problem. Certainly, we have all been given a major environmental wake-up call by the plastic disaster of July 23. *May Liu reports*

For anyone who has had their head in the sand in recent weeks, and missed all the environmental activity and media coverage, here's what happened. On July 23 during Typhoon Vicente, the worst tropical storm to reach Hong Kong in 13 years, a ship lost six containers at sea, each one loaded with 1,000, 25-kilogramme bags of preproduction plastic pellets. These tiny plastic beads or nurdles (along with full and empty bags) immediately started showing up en masse on Hong Kong's southern coast, mainly along the beaches from Lamma to the eastern side of Lantau.

DB environmentalist Tracey Read, who is no stranger to plastic pollution, having been part of a recent research

expedition across the plastic soup that stretches from Tokyo to Hawaii, was the first person to find and identify the pellets. "The morning after the storm, Sam Pak Wan at DB North Plaza was covered with nurdles – it looked as if it was blanketed in snow – and there were knee-deep piles some 0.5 metres deep," she says. After hooking up with Gary Stokes [of Hemingway's DB, who moonlights as the Hong Kong coordinator of Sea Shepherd] and fellow DB environmentalist Kevin Laurie, Tracey immediately contacted the government.

In dealing with this disaster, the Hong Kong Government's reaction has been swift and decisive – teams came out to DB the very next day to begin the clean-up process. Within

days Gary began operating joint search missions in a Government Flying Services (GFS) helicopter, with the Hong Kong Marine Department (MD), and the full scale of the problem was realised. "Either by helicopter or small boats, we have been working to create an up-to-date picture of the entire south coast of Hong Kong, identifying hotspots so that we can relay to other Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) and the MD where to assign resources of manpower and equipment," he says. "Now we know where the nurdles are, and just as importantly where they are not."

Leading local NGOs, notably DB Green, Ocean Park Conservation Fund, Ecovision China, Sea Shepherd (HK) and World Wildlife Fund (HK), assisted by the Chinese petrochemical company Sinopec Group, are now monitoring the situation. Beach clean-ups have been successfully organised all over the southern part of Hong Kong, and will continue for the foreseeable future.

"Some days I go to the beach and there are very few pellets washed up, other days many more are washed up," says Dana Winograd, *Around DB's* Editorial Coordinator and one of the beach clean-up organisers for DB Green. "We have a one- to two-day window of opportunity immediately after a storm to collect a lot of pellets as many are washed in with the tide (and the rubbish) at that time. We need a regular flow of volunteers, which we have been getting from all over Hong Kong, but we need more support from DBers – it's so much easier for DB people to get to the beaches first thing after a storm."

Beach clean-ups (on Nim Shue Wan, Sam Pak Wan and Cheung Sha Lan) are still being organised by DB Green. "The CEO of Sinopec from Beijing was in DB on August 23, with 70 others, including 30 First Division Hong Kong Kitchee footballers, cleaning the beaches," says Dana. "Volunteers from all over are totally committed to getting the job done. We counted 300 a day by the end of the August 10 weekend, and DB Green has reached over 52,000 people on its facebook page."

Moving forward, Gary and Tracey are about to set up a new NGO, Plastic Free Seas. "It is dedicated to advocating change in the way we all view and use plastics in society today, through education and action campaigns," Tracey explains.

"It started because of nurdles, however it's grown much bigger than that now," Gary concludes. "People are coming to remote beaches they'd never have been to; they have seen the beauty of our wild Hong Kong and seen the trash. People are now starting to question why and how. Why are we trashing our natural world, and how did our trash end up here? The Plastic Revolution has begun, and I am so happy it has started here, in our beloved Hong Kong. The world is watching, and we will set an example for others to follow!" **B**



Nurdlers in action



Eco-warrior of the day



Gary Stokes and Tracey Read

Get involved

DB Green facebook page, www.dbgreen.org, or www.facebook.com/DBGreenHK

Gary Stokes' website blog, www.garystokesphotography.com/blog

Plastic Disaster Hong Kong facebook page, www.facebook.com/PlasticDisasterHongKong

Plastic Free Seas, www.PlasticFreeSeas.org

Tracey Read's website blog, www.journeytotheplasticocean.wordpress.com



For more topical DB topics, go to magazine articles/talking points at www.arounddb.com