Turtles return to a once thrashed beach!

A world of rubbish lapping the beach of Libaran, prior to Alex's big clean up exercise, in February 2015. Inset: Alex

Kan Yaw Chong

EVEN turtles hate rubbish. To fathom this environmental lesson, Ground Zero in Libaran is emphatic.

Few, if any, turtles landed when garbage thrashed an entire 1.2km long beach (now labelled Sector 2) on Libaran Island before Alex Yee instituted a systematic 'Good-riddance to Rubbish' Programme in February 2015.

Cheers!

Turtles responded with a vengeance.

August 16, three turtles landed on a refreshed Sector 2 beach and laid 326 eggs in total – 186 Green and 140 Hawksbill eggs respectively.

August 25, another three turtles landed and laid more eggs.

"It shows the effectiveness of the 'Good-riddance to Rubbish' programme, because they were not there before February 2015, even if people may argue that July-October is the turtle nesting peak season in the area," Alex noted.

A 'doer' responding to private & official concerns

Credit to a private conclusive 'doer' like Alex for sure.

But this happy story that impacts the destiny our sea turtles, actually started with a network of private-official concerns and eventually private-community actions.

The genesis of it all began in July 2011 with a concerned traffic policemen cum land owner, Amiril, who reported to Roland Nuin, former Manager of Sandakan Division Wildlife Department, that turtles had been nesting on his land behind the beach (labelled Sector 1) but dogs were eating them and villagers were collecting them.

Knowing each other from a previous collaborative Tarsier conservation in Kinabatangan, Roland asked Alex whether he was keen to look at Libaran for funding a possible turtle hatchery project.

September 2011, Roland took Alex to the ground.

"I saw with my own eyes ravaged turtle nests under a grove of trees in Sector 1," Alex said.

He immediately said "yes" to the proposed hatchery.

No hope otherwise

"I saw no hope otherwise for the turtle population of Libaran which was excluded from the 17.4sq km Selingan Marine Park (comprising Selingan, Bakkungan Kecil & Gulisan), gazetted in 1977, on grounds that it's not considered a major population," he said.

Permanent wildlife staff monitor, protect and tag turtles in Selingan.

No such luxury in Libaran.

"I realised that unless enforcement officers are forwarded-deployed on a permanent basis, who's to stop the egg destruction in such a remote Libaran," Alex said.

The step – wildlife wardens

The immediate first step?

Honorary Wildlife Wardens – create a crop of 12 villagers were put through this training programme, conducted by Sabah Wildlife Department (SWD), in October 2011.

SWD also erected posters all around the island that collection of turtle eggs violate the Sabah Wildlife Enactment 1998.

Teaming up with land owner & SWD

By July 2012, SWD entered into a formal agreement with Alex to set up the hatchery whereby SWD provides the technical know-how while Alex pays!

By end 2012, the hatchery was built and named Taman Hadiah – meaning Gift to all, after finalising a land lease deal with Amiril in September 2012.

To give the turtle conservation programme official and legal sanction, SWD signed a Memorandum of Understanding with Alex on a three-pronged purpose: (1) Raising awareness on the conservation value of sea turtles, locally and internationally (2) Undertake research aimed at better understanding the life cycles of sea turtles (3) Make Libaran available to sea turtle research programmes to local and international students.

The beach seen after the clean-up exercise. (inset above right) A turtle laying eggs on the beach. (inset left) Signage shows the number of eggs laid on this sector of the beach.

Ridding the massive thrash

Next, how to rid the massive rubbish?

Sandakan Municipal Council? Too far-fetched a dream.

Gotong-royong, as many elected reps like to do? One-off stuff, clean for a few days, filthy the whole year round, completely useless.

Employ the Honorary Wildlife Wardens as beach cleaners? Yes, good idea.

When a village chief stops the big clean up!

In fact, in 2013, the wildlife wardens doubled up as garbage collectors for one month – cleaned up the thrash-infested 1.2km Sector 2 beach right up to the main village.

Alas, as irrational and fool-hardy as it may seem, former Village Development and Security Chief ordered a stop to the cleaning programme beyond Sector 1 beach!

The army of thrash re-invaded the entire Sector 2 beach.

Episode exposes imperative of good leader

This episode puts the question of leadership on the spotlight.

Ultimately, everything rises and falls on the leadership, defined a top guy who does the right thing.

Yee and his wardens were mere managers on the ground – organised the best way to do the right thing ie. clean up the thrash.

But management floundered.

Why?

Look at the leader – the top guy, what manner of a leader was he to even stop people from doing good riddance to garbage – the right thing to do by any standard?

Obviously not authentic, competent, outstanding and not suitable for the role and task, he was replaced.

New leader changes destiny of turtles

Jikral Kahar took over as the new Village Development and Security Chief in mid-2014 and set everything towards a positive direction.

The new leader backed the turtle conservation project and rallied the Libaran community behind it.

He organised an unprecedented dialogue.

Jikral articulated the benefits of cleanliness to a packed gathering of villagers while Rashid Saburi, the new SWD Sandakan Division Manager, explained why turtle conservation is essential.

Villagers spoke up, too, while Yee presented hampers to winning houses in a Clean Compound Contest.

Sustainable 'Good-riddance to Rubbish' system set up!

"I then looked for a sustainable way to rid the thrash and keep beach clean for good," Alex said.

"January 2015, Friends of Sea Turtles Education and Research (Foster), an association devoted to care for the conservation work in Libaran, came into being in February 2015," he said,

"February 2015, Foster launched the 1.2km beach cleaning project," Alex added.

"This is no gotong-royong but designed to run on a sustainable basis by dividing the 1.2km beach into 24 lots 50m long each and recruited villagers who are paid RM80 per lot per month for cleaning on a daily basis, besides buying from them big and small plastic bottles at 10 sen and 5 sen each respectively, or total RM1,200 per month," Yee said.

Calling for co-sponsors in face of challenge

The challenge is another 3km of beaches need to be cleaned but funds are short.

Villagers not employed by Foster don't pass the eggs to the hatchery, preferring to consumer or sell them in the open market where enforcement is lacking.

A RM1,200 contribution per year by any body or corporate participant can make a difference, Yee said.

Names of sponsors will be appropriately acknowledged both on site and in the conservation programme distributed to tourists.

Those interested can contact fosterseaturtle@gmail.com.