



Five months ago: A mountain of garbage overruns the entire beach of Libaran.



Five months later: Yee shows off the contrast of a cleaned Libaran beach on Feb 6 at the same spot where he was photographed with a heap of garbage last August.

# Libaran battles against the 'power' of wastes

Kan Yaw Chong

**W**AKE up Sabah, to the power of wastes! The reason is waste power seems to be getting stronger than political power, especially when power of the day continues to fail to contain waste its ascendancy at source. So, what happens?

Everybody ends up having to battle waste power at its destinations—the beaches, the islands, seabeds, rivers etc turned rubbish dumps—a perpetual battle that yields no closing victory.

Yes, this is the age of over-powering human wastes on the one hand and incompetent, inefficient waste scavenging means and will power on the other which damages our quality of life and the state of planet earth.

**Rising tyranny of garbage everywhere**  
Ugly, dirty, unsightly, unwanted, harmful, unstable, toxic, corrosive, even fatal land-disposed or sea-disposed wastes used, consumed, spent thoughtlessly and carelessly by Sabahans have become so invasive and ubiquitous that no one can escape its tyranny anywhere in Sabah.

If one thinks any of its remotest islands is a true wilderness, rubbish is your frontline receptionist.

Everywhere one looks one sees the overwhelming power of rubbish and pollutants taking over.

**Army of rubbish sapping Sabah's vigour**

And the power of this army of wastes is rapidly sapping the energy, strength, vigour, beauty of every landscape and ecosystem functions of a once beautiful Sabah, enfeebling and tiring every environment one cares to look.

Now, if the power of the State cannot defeat the power of wastes, then we might have to invoke the power of effective and willing ordinary folks and give them that power of attorney to beat back the tide of wastes that consistently keeps coming everyday and has begun to squander Sabah's entire stock of God-

given productive natural capital. Every beautiful island, every beautiful landscape, every pristine coast, every pristine river and most of all for the purpose of this report—every natural turtle nesting beach is under siege.

**What Sabah should learn from the lesson of Libaran**

But this is an uplifting story about Pulau Libaran.

Amidst this waste gloom, an interesting private effort on the island opens our eyes to a herculean effort needed to fight waste power at destination and not at source.

**Why such attention on Libaran?**

Because sea turtles nest at the beaches of this 450-acre Libaran island, barely 40 minutes northeast of Sandakan, it is of eco-tourism interest, even though far fewer turtles land here compared to Seilingan Island just five minutes by boat, nearby.

**When villagers & dogs started eating turtle eggs**

Wildlife Expeditions used to operate a slew of chalets here.

But Walai Penyu Resort—a subsidiary of well established Trekkers Lodge Sdn Bhd owned by Alex Yee, is the latest eco-tourism outfit to set foot on the island, two years ago, by some circumstances not of its own making.

More about that later. Sea turtles are easily the obvious ecostars. But Libaran islanders were eating the eggs, besides stray dogs.

**SWD sought heroic effort to save turtles**

Sabah Wildlife Department (SWD) was looking for no less than a heroic effort to save the Libaran turtle population from extinction.

A senior SWD thought about Alex Yee, on the basis of his experience in Kinabatangan.

Yee agreed to take a look, back in 2011, and agreed that SWD had a case worthy of help.

But soon, he saw more garbage than

natural beaches so that whatever few Libaran-bound turtles that remains, couldn't even land because the mountain of garbage covered practically the lengths and breadth of the island's 3km beaches.

Who is to clear the wastes from the beaches on a regular basis. The IKKK?

The Sandakan Municipal Council? Yes, that would help but no, it didn't happen. For the simple reason that it is a huge job that requires due diligence on a regular basis and the other is a very costly undertaking.

**The first cause of Yee's flame of interest in Libaran started.**

But the flame of Yee's eco-interest first and eco-tourism later, in Libaran all started in 2010 when a Libaran land owner alerted the Sabah Wildlife Department (SWD) that turtles landed on his land but dogs and villagers were eating the eggs.

SWD realised they needed someone trustworthy to set up a turtle hatchery. The search tracked down to Yee who paid his maiden visit to Libaran in 2011, then struck a land lease deal with the land owner who reported the turtle presence on the beach portion of his land.

So, the first principle or first cause of Alex Yee's presence in Libaran started with an invitation from the SWD which was mooring how to conserve the Libaran's turtles.

This is an important fact to remember, so that if anyone were to impute motive, they need to understand Yee's first driving intention was to help conserve the turtles, not business.

**Turtle hatchery first**

So, Yee set up the turtle hatchery in July 2012 with technical help from SWD, named 'Taman Hadiah' (Gift Park) so named because it represents his gift to the people.

To cut the story short, Yee signed a Memorandum of Understanding with the Sabah Wildlife Department in June 2013 on a turtle conservation program.

The programme's terms and condi-



Yee watches after a big Green turtle in Libaran, recently.

tions include creating awareness among the locals and visitors on the conservation value of the Libaran sea turtles.

In addition, to undertake research projects aimed at better understanding the life cycles of sea turtles around the Libaran area and make available research programme to international and local students.

Which gave birth to Foster (Friends of Sea Turtles Education and Research).

**Turtle landing increased since 2011**

Since 2011, Foster and Trekkers Lodge have sponsored 12 villagers to undergo the Honorary Wildlife Warden course and provided them the employment to take care of the hatchery. An increase in turtle landings between 2011 and 2014 had been reported.

"We have released a total of 11,053 baby turtles of which 6,793 were Green and 4,261 were Hawksbill turtles," Yee said.

**Former village chief stood on the way, until**

But the garbage invasion threatened to nullify or destroy all that conservation effort.

Yee knew a key performance index for the hatchery included elimination of the

mountains of garbage from the beaches of Libaran.

So his staff started beach cleaning campaign and egg collection for the hatchery from mid 2012.

But alas, guess who stopped them—the Village Chief at the time, who barred Walai Penyu Resort staff from both activities, beyond the bounds of Yee's limited leased land!

Until Jikral Kahar was appointed the new Ketua Kampung (Village Chief) in the beginning of 2014.

**Transformation under new Ketua Kampung**

Under the new leadership and authority of a dynamic Jikral Kahar, everything changed.

To cut the story short, Jikral accepted Yee's idea on 'how' (method) to get rid of the rubbish power from Libaran's beaches.

"One day in October 2014, as I was walking back to Walai Penyu Resort from the village, an idea struck me," Yee said.

Why not divide the 3km beach into lots of 50-metre long each, pay the villagers RM50 to clean each lot.

Which would give employment to 60 people (3,000m divided by 50m).

**New chief picks up clean-up method with gusto**

"When I sounded the idea to my staff, they immediately thought it was a good idea. When I talked to Jikral and the Imam, they quickly endorsed the idea but instead of one cleaner per 50 metres, Jikral proposed one cleaner per four lots or 200m to make the job more attractive.

Jikral held a dialogue with the villagers to see who's interested and awarded the job to an initial batch of five to clean a 1.2km long beach section.

This means each cleaner will get RM400 per month, except the fifth who took six lots and get RM500/month, at a total cost of RM2,400 per month or RM28,800 per year," Yee said

**Adopters pay for the big clean-up**  
Who are paying for all this?

ABC Tours Sdn Bhd; Traverse Tours Sdn Bhd; OIB Tours Sdn Bhd; STWA Tours Sdn Bhd; Maju Jaya Sdn Bhd; Sneak Peak Designs and Ministry of Tourism and Culture Malaysia, Sabah and Friends of Sea Turtles | Education & Research (Foster) which adopt lots and commit themselves to pay for the total cost per lot per year.

The cleaning programme officially started February 1, 2014.

The impact was dramatic during a press tour on February 6 to cover the 'Handing Over of Beach Cleaning Equipment and Signing of Letter of Appointment'

The 1.2km beach once littered with rubbish became spanking clean!

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Now: An immaculate beach of Libaran after the clean-up programme which started on February 1.

View of Kg Libaran. Note the clean beach.



Above: Plastic bottles collected can be redeemed at 10 sen per bottle.

# Pleasant surprise to a Mocat director

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The clean-up transformation pleasantly inspired Ag Ahmad Zaki Abu Bakar, Director of Ministry of Tourism and Culture Malaysia Sabah Office, to conclude: "Nothing is impossible!"

"This is a pioneering programme and a good model. So we are adopting four lots or 200 metres for one year. I hope it is successful and if it is successful, I will talk to the Ministry to replicate the same program across Sabah," Ahmad said.

## Lesson from the experience – not about business

Alex Yee, the brainchild behind the programme, admitted that he actually failed two full years, despite his business sense and business acumen.

So, what are the lessons that may make it not so easy to duplicate?

"This is not business, this is community and the really sticky part is getting a community to tango," he explained.

"If it comes to business sense to make a business work, I can do it from my own business acumen and business know-how," he told Daily Express.

"But if it comes to community, it will take the community to their side of the formula to clap with me," Yee added.

## New Chief bares problem at historic dialogue

"In this case, even if I were willing to do it back in 2012, the programme (cleaning) did not take off for at least two years until August 2014 when the new village chief Jikral Kahar organised a historic dialogue involving the whole village where he spoke with conviction," Yee recalled.

Jikral told the dialogue that four operators would be shy even to publish pictures of Libaran in their promotion brochures given such filthy beaches, let alone bring tourists to the island.

Not only rubbish, Jikral took issue with the hundreds of cattle which trespassed other people's lands and roamed freely on the beaches where they pooped freely.

He proposed the cattle be fenced up by January 2014 and the people said yes.

The dialogue ended with giving hampers to houses that won the 'Cleanest Compound Contest' award.

## Right top guy in JKKK make things happen: Yee

Today, the house compounds in Kg Libaran are immaculately clean – a very rare sight, if not impossible sight in Sabah.

"That was the dialogue event that kick-started the cleanliness campaign," Yee said.

"You can see that I myself cannot do it, it's only through the collaboration of a village chief who can mobilise the support behind him, I realised that you need the local authority and leadership (referring to village level leadership), willing village chief and willing village security and development committee that programs like this will go through, which I didn't have in 2012 and 2013. This is the same challenge I have been working on community in Kinabatangan. We were successful in Sungai Lokan, Kg Bilut, Abai but Sukau is a challenge because the appointed local authority is not helpful. So the lesson is you need to appoint the

right guy to the JKKK who really has the interest of the village and community at heart," Yee asserted.

## Courage, foresight, commitment to time line

"In the case of Jikral, this unusual guy has the courage, the foresight and wisdom to see his promise and commitment through by setting a time line and followed through his time line," Yee pointed out.

"Of course it is not easy to filter out the people who go inside a kampung with ulterior motives but they must be able to know this special attribute," Yee said.

Still, Yee said he would not claim success as yet.

## Putting in Performance Index to ensure success

"To succeed you must always have a goal and set a performance index. We can tell this within six months. We will monitor progress every quarterly. The cleaning up is clearly spelled out – to remove logs, rubbish, debris like plastic bags, bottles and sell the bottles back to us for building conservation houses using plastic bottles. Because we involve local villagers, it can be done in a more consistent and sustainable way because the rubbish is consistent, every day you have rubbish. So this is not another typical one-off gotong-royong, then rubbish 364 days. Gotong-royong is good but not sustainable," Yee noted.

## Headman's words at ceremony

During the Letter of Appointment Signing ceremony and beach cleaning tool distribution that included wheel barrels, plastic and metal rakes, Jikral told the appointees to "work hard".

"If this is successful, I am sure the rest of the villagers (from 76 households) will join you and take up more cleaning lots," Jikral said.

"I will also talk to the Member of Parliament for Libaran to think about replicating the same program to the rest of this island in his constituency," he said. Yes, it's all very good.

## The ultimate answer is still eliminating the root cause

Still, in the ultimate analysis, the best of this effort is still treating the effect, like a dog chasing its own tail, going round and round without end, not eliminating the first cause or taking out the root cause once and for all.

In the end, the cost can run into millions, and billions if it becomes a country wide exercise if we eternally rely on waste pickers to scavenge plastics and other wastes.

By now, at the end of this report of Libaran, it should become abundantly clear to our political, community and industry leaders that wastes is an upfront State economic, social and environmental issue, not a backwater issue.

And wastes is rubbishing Sabah's worth to a very low ebb.

If it is not addressed through clearly and fully spelled out strategic policies such as pay as you throw to reduce wastes or more decisive waste recovery programs, waste power can make political power look silly. – Kan Yaw Chong



Letter of appointment signing ceremony for the first batch of five beach cleaners. Witness the signing are Alex Yee (2nd left) Ahmad Zaki Abu Bakar (MOCAT Director) and Jikral Kahar (4th left), Libaran



SWD sign post warning villagers against collecting turtle eggs for food.



Immaculately clean housing compound at Pulau Libaran – a rare sight in Sabah.



Now – a beautiful beach amidst a first class mangrove.



Cattle now under control.



Ahmad erecting adoption of Lot sign post for Mocat.