



Some 500kg of rubbish was collected from Marina Bay in Miri. — WONG WEE LIEM



About 300 volunteers turned up at Marina Bay in Miri, Sarawak, last month for the city's largest beach cleanup. — SL WONG



Plastic detox

A beach in Miri, Sarawak, is cleaned up. But it's just a short term measure.

By SL WONG

THE four siblings were up at 6am, impatient to get going. After all, today was the day of the big beach cleanup.

They were only four, five, seven and nine years old, but they loved nature. And they loved the idea of doing something for Mother Earth together with other people.

In fact, Azhan Zulfia an-Najla, Akram Firas al-Hameez, Ahnaf Razin al-Hameez and Akhtar Hanis an-Najla were among a record 300 volunteers who turned up at Marina Bay in Miri, Sarawak, last month for the city's largest beach cleanup.

The volunteers bagged an estimated 500kg of rubbish from a 600m stretch of recreational beach. This event kicked off Miri's first World Oceans Day (WOD) celebration. Organised by a coalition of non-governmental organisations (NGOs), local government and academics, it featured numerous activities throughout the month of July.

"We hope that all these activities will help the ocean," said the event's co-organising chairperson Datin Judy Wan Morshidi of the Malaysian Red Crescent Miri chapter. "But for it to happen, strong support from the people is required."

Particularly alarming is marine plastic pollution, the global conservation focus of this year's WOD (which officially falls on June 8).

According to the United Nations Environment Program (UNEP), eight million tonnes of plastic enter the seas every year.

This is alarming because ocean plastic does not biodegrade. Instead, it breaks up into ever smaller pieces (until it becomes microplastics) and remains in the ocean. Not only does this mean plastic trash washing up on our beaches. According to scientists, it creates a kind of toxic plastic "soup" that pollutes the furthest seas, reaching even formerly pristine areas such as the Arctic and the middle of the Pacific Ocean.

It endangers and kills coral reefs and wildlife, including seabirds and turtles, and travels up the food chain from plankton to humans. This means that the plastic we throw into the ocean eventually ends up back in our bodies (when we eat seafood!).

Borrowing from children

"This (plastic) rubbish came in from the sea," said Amri Azmi, the father of the four children at the beach cleanup.

A teacher and sea scout leader, he took his kids to the event to teach them about beach litter and ocean health. The children were a hit with the local media for their diligence in picking up litter for the entire two-hour duration.

Concern for the next generation is also what drives Iqbal Abdollah,

the other WOD co-organising chairperson.

Involved in conservation since 1998, he stated that "nowadays I will always say that I'm just borrowing nature from my daughters. So I need to have our oceans be as clean as possible so that my daughters will be able to go diving or to walk along the beach happily."

Iqbal is from the Miri branch of the Malaysian Nature Society (MNS), which has been involved in beach surveys for several years.

It was with MNS that another key WOD participant, geologist Dr Dominique Dodge-Wan, started examining beach litter in Miri two years ago. An associate professor at Curtin University Sarawak, she has collected data from five recreational beaches and analysed it using international guidelines.

At the WOD symposium the day after the beach cleanup, Dodge-Wan revealed that most of the litter was plastic and that every type of plastic used in the Miri district was found on the beaches. The main items were small plastic bottles (less than 2 litres) and plastic bags.

The symposium audience was dismayed to learn that a survey showed that in a 10m survey on Marina Bay where the cleanup was done, 167 bottles were found.

"We need to prevent trash in the river reaching the beaches," said Dodge-Wan.

"Better still, prevent it reaching



Teacher and sea scout leader Amri Azmi brought his four children to the Miri beach cleanup to teach them the importance of taking care of the ocean's health. — SL WONG