

By VICTORIA BROWN  
sunday@thestar.com.my

DRINK up, folks, but without the straw please.

Malaysians use up about 31 million plastic straws every day, based on conservative estimates, and these would likely end up in landfills.

Each plastic straw takes "hundreds of years" to degrade, says environment and solid waste management specialist Dr Theng Lee Chong, who estimates that one straw is used per person each day in Malaysia.

(Americans use single-use straws at an average rate of 1.6 straws per person each day. This equates to 500 million plastic straws being used every day in the United States alone.)

Last year, Malaysians produced about 38,000 tonnes of waste daily.

Solid Waste Management and Public Cleansing Corporation (SWCorp Malaysia) deputy chief executive officer (technical) Dr Mohd Pauze Mohamad Taha says that only 0.5% of the waste is incinerated. The rest is landfilled.

"Single-use plastics represent a huge threat to the environment if it not properly managed," he says.

Dr Mohd Pauze says that single-use plastics are known for their interference in ecosystems. They also contribute to floods as they clogged up pipes and drains.

"This threat is not only related to the sheer volume of them ending up in landfills, but also to the resources needed to produce, transport and (occasionally) recycle them, and the emissions resulting from these processes improperly disposed," he said.

According to a National Solid Waste Management Department's 2012 report, plastic makes up 13.2% of Malaysia's total household waste.

As for plastic straws, it is almost an automatic practice to consume cold drinks out of them. They are given to diners without a second thought.

# Spare that straw, please

A seemingly harmless tool that helps you enjoy your cold drinks is sapping the environment.



**Dr Theng:** The straw is very small... to segregate for recycling purposes.



**Dr Mohd Pauze:** Only 0.5% of waste is incinerated daily.

Mareena Yahya Kerschot, a co-founder of the "Tak Nak Straw" campaign, says this habit was harming the environment.

"You consume your drink in less than five minutes, then you throw the straw away," she says.

These straws, she says, are among the plastics making its way into the ocean, getting eaten by fish and trapping sea creatures.

"That video of a turtle who had a straw stuck in its nose left a big impact on me," said Kershot, referring to a YouTube video which showed researchers pulling out a plastic straw from the turtle's nose.

The video has had 12 million views. And the turtle has inadvertently become the poster child for

the anti-straw campaign.

Plastic straws are not biodegradable. Instead, it breaks down into small pieces called microplastics.

"These microplastics keep accumulating in the oceans, and it affects the food chain and overall ecosystem. And it is highly harmful to the sea animals," Dr Theng said.

"Many so-called 'biodegradable' or 'degradable' plastics in the markets are actually not fully degraded, but only visually breakdown into smaller pieces of microplastics," he said.

The UK-based Ellen MacArthur Foundation, which works in education and training, said in a report last year that there will be more plastic waste than fish by 2050.



**What a waste:** Workers collecting plastic waste at Pulau Buring sanitary landfill in Nibong Tebal, Penang, in this file picture.

Most plastic straws are made from polypropylene (PP).

Even though PP plastic can be recycled, it is hardly done due to its size.

"The straw is very small and hard to pick up or segregate for recycling purposes," said Dr Theng.

"If a recycler finds a big bundle of plastic straws, he would definitely pick it up piece by piece from the waste stream, he would rather spend time and focus on other larger plastic products," he says.

Should people even use straws?

"We are grown adults. Do we really need a straw? Even my kids don't need straws," Tak Nak Straw co-founder Claire Sancelor says.

She says that the need for hygiene should not be an excuse to use straws.

"Some people say that a straw is needed because the restaurants don't clean the glasses well. If you're worried about hygiene, what about the plate and the cutlery?" she asks.

She points out that most people don't use straws at home, "so why do we use straws when we are

out?" Another co-founder of Tak Nak Straw, Carolyn Lau, says the campaign is just one of many ways to develop a consciousness of what we consume and how we consume it.

"What I find with people nowadays is that we take these conveniences for granted," she says.

Tak Nak Straw wants Malaysians to start saying no to single-use plastic straws.

If you prefer to still use straws, buy a reusable one.

"You can buy a stainless steel straw. You can carry it in your bag. It's washable and unbreakable," she says.

Lau says that she is also looking to work with the orang asli community to make bamboo straws.

"We want to get all that information that is out there to Malaysians so that they can make informed choices."

"We will get there, one straw at a time," Lau says.

Watch the video  
thestartv.com



## Showing the way to stop the use of straws

IN a bid to reduce plastic waste, some eateries have stopped serving single-use plastic straws with their drinks.

As an alternative, the Mockingbird Cafe in Kuala Lumpur serves their cold drinks with reusable stainless steel straws.

"Stainless steel straws not only look trendy but it is also a good start to being a bit greener. We have to start somewhere," says the cafe owner, Elaine Lamb.

Lamb says that her customers would sometimes ask why she uses metal straws.

"Some of them ask about the hygiene of metal straws. I would tell them that we wash them very thoroughly and we soak them overnight," she says.

"These metal straws are a great conversation starter and it is a good way to raise awareness and educate the public on the bad effects of plastic and plastic straws," she adds.

Lamb says that she aims for Mockingbird Cafe to be plastic-free. It will soon stop giving away plastic cutlery for takeaways.

"Some people expect plastic cutlery and a plastic container with a plastic bag. They are not informed about the detrimental effects of these plastics," she says. Bubbles Dive Resort in



**Eco-friendly options:**

Children at Bubbles Dive Resort in Pulau Perhentian holding up paper straws and reusable metal and bamboo straws.

Perhentian Island also stopped serving plastic straws at their restaurant on May 31.

"Earlier in March, we started promoting 'No Straw Please' at our restaurant by asking all our guests whether they really need a straw," said Bubbles Dive Resort marketing director Peisee Hwang.

"In our nightly 'turtle talk' with our resort guests, we spread awareness of how much single use plastic product was being discarded and ended up in the ocean," she says.

Hwang says that the staff have witnessed first-hand the amount of plastic that has been washed up

ashore, besides dead sea creatures.

"We have seen how coral died by suffocation because it was covered by a big plastic bag," she says.

Hwang says that the staff have rescued some aquatic creatures suspected of ingesting plastic.

"Our customers have been fully supportive and appreciative of our efforts," Hwang says.

"A lot of them bought metal and bamboo straws from us so they can carry it with them on their travels."

Hwang says that Bubbles Dive Resort would order paper straws and stocks bamboo straws from Bali. It plans to source their bamboo straws from the orang asli.

## Low awareness on recycling among Malaysians

AWARENESS in reducing household waste through recycling is still low among Malaysians, says Solid Waste Management and Public Cleansing Corporation (SWCorp Malaysia).

SWCorp deputy chief executive officer (technical) Dr Mohd Pauze Mohamad Taha said that the recycling rate in Malaysia last year is only 17.5% despite introducing the waste segregation programme.

"This shows that there is still a large portion of solid waste being disposed in landfills and not deviated to recycle," he says.

It also means that Malaysia is very much behind compared with a number of developed countries.

A European Environment Agency 2013 report revealed that recycling rates are highest in Austria at 63%, followed by Germany (62%), Belgium (58%), the Netherlands (51%) and Switzerland (51%).

Dr Mohd Pauze said the reason for the low recycling rate is due to a "much lower" level of awareness on the 3Rs: Reduce, Reuse and Recycle here.

"To address this problem,

SWCorp believes that public knowledge and awareness of 3R should be enhanced from time to time especially the importance of implementing 3R and solid waste segregation," he says.

He says SWCorp is now undertaking various public awareness campaigns at schools and extra-curricular clubs.

"We have programme with schools, kindergartens and also recycling modules for teachers to promote recycling activities," Dr Mohd Pauze says.

"Recycling programmes are being done along with Separation at Source initiatives, he adds.

SWCorp is also providing talks and exhibitions to other target groups such as those in colleges and universities, the private sector and non-governmental organisations.

Public access to recycling facilities is also something SWCorp is striving to improve.

Dr Mohd Pauze says that access will be made more convenient by providing recycling cages in non-landed housing areas and enforcing "Separation at Source" for states that implement waste segregation.