

From: The Wilsons  
Date: 19/05/2015 08:42  
Subject: Re: Subcommittee on Merchant Shipping (Prevention of Pollution by Garbage) Regulation and Merchant Shipping (Prevention of Pollution by Garbage) Regulation (Repeal) Regulation: Meeting on 26 May 2015 - Invitation for submissions

Thank you so much for the invitation to provide our views.

Living Lamma has been cleaning beaches for 6 years and we are intimately acquainted with the garbage that washes up on our shores. We not only collect the trash, but sort it, count it and observe what likely human activity has caused it.

Refuse from shipping is no doubt a major contributor. We made one beach on the north side of Lamma the focus of a year long study. We picked up and counted the trash every 4-6 weeks for a year, also recording the brands from the 2,872 plastic bottles that we picked up. As well as general litter, refuse specific to shipping activities included oil cans, pumps, oily rags, fishing floats, polystyrene boxes, netting, fishing line, clothing, toothbrushes, lighters and any other unwanted item. Ironically we pick up Marine Department yellow plastic bags that are given to boat owners and are supposed to be collected back. Instead, some are thrown into the sea full of trash.

We also find a lot of foodstuff on the beach. Though this is “organic” there is a big difference in the way that otherwise compostable material behaves in saltwater. It does not decompose, but instead becomes fairly revolting - not great when it is brought back to land, but a great attraction for the flies.

Every beach clean up is a learning experience. We see the fish bite marks in the plastics and now take educational materials on our clean ups to teach people about plastic ingestion in plankton and the food chain. We believe this knowledge is generally lacking in society. We receive daily news stories from various other groups around the world that are investigating and trying to do something about the global disaster that is plastic in our oceans. We believe that much of the problem is caused by habit, coupled with a lack of basic environmental literacy and services to enable people to act easily to be responsible with the waste they produce.

From early times, people simply discarded that which was not longer of use to them, whether this was on land or at sea. At one time, both the type of trash (natural materials) and the volume did not cause the world a problem. The habit of throwing things away has only become a problem with the vast amount of non-natural trash that we produce on such a large scale. Waste services have not kept up with developments in waste generation. In Hong Kong, as in many other places, many people might not even be aware of the trash they produce. It is brought into the house by a helper, unwrapped and disposed of without much thought about what happens next. It is thrown away, and that's that.

We believe it is the same on many ships. In some cases, the people may not know and in other cases they may not care. Through our conversations with local people we do know that there are also people who do know and care, but feel “mouh bahnfat” - a feeling that there is nothing in their power that they can do in the face of so much trash with so little local facilities to enable them to recycle effectively.

Last year, for the Hong Kong Clean Up, we cleaned the beach in Yung Shue Wan every day for 42 days. We took off around 5 tonnes of construction waste and, as we sorted through layer upon layer of historical dumping, it became clear to us that it was normal practice to throw unwanted items into the sea. Since then we have been trying to engage both the Environmental Protection Department and the Lands Department to help us properly restore the harbour. This seems to be beyond their scope, but it begs the question: If the public see government departments allowing our natural landscape to become, and then remain, blighted, how can we expect ordinary people to behave any differently? We have also documented and made complaints about incidents of government contractors littering our neighbourhood. Though sometimes it will be cleaned up following a complaint, normal practice is to litter and try to pass/deny responsibility.

Sea Shepherd photographed and reported construction workers working on the Zhuhai/Macau Bridge tipping trash off their barges. Whether it is land based activity or on the sea, we need urgent measures to educate people, and to use every means in our power to stem the tide of trash into our oceans. Tightening legislation is certainly necessary - it is not OK to throw trash into the sea or discard it around our neighbourhoods. There is no “away” in throw it away. We also need to make sure that the type of trash generation we are allowing is regulated, and in some cases banned.

We have urged the Secretary for Environmental Protection to declare the trash in our ocean as a disaster - after all, if the plastic was in its pre-processed form (oil), it would be considered so. Declaring a disaster would show leadership and focus people's minds on the seriousness of the problem. Our kids know: "What goes in the see, goes in me." Environmental education in some schools is world class, but these kids must wonder why the grown ups are being so slow to act. Indeed, all of us who have spent years studying and reporting the problems to government are perplexed by the government's recent study, which concludes: Overall, marine refuse does not constitute a serious problem in Hong Kong.

For our group, and the other organisations that have spent years working on the problem, it is a very serious problem indeed: Devastating would be a more accurate description.

Living Lamma is volunteering support to Coastal Watch, a funded study of marine trash and ecology and I would like to put you in touch with the other members, all of whom have their own evidence on the seriousness of the problem of marine trash: WWF, Ecovision, ERC, Plastic Free Seas, Green Council, Ocean Park, and Eco-Marine (copied into this email).

I would suggest that, if the panel is in any doubt, they arrange a site visit to Lap Sap Wan with the Coastal Watch members. There is nothing like the experience of standing on a mountain of trash on a beach to focus people on the urgency of this problem - accept perhaps actually trying to clean it up again and again and see it coming back in alarming quantities.

We have reports, video and photographs to share, should you require any further information. Here is a link to the Lap Sap Wan news report: <https://hk.news.yahoo.com/video/垃圾灣堆過百噸垃圾-20年未處理-015036194.html>

A video from our clean up on Saturday (we have many more examples of these - sometimes it is very difficult to stay positive, but we have to if we are to engage people): <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jcnVAMEv1gw>

And a news report - we were very surprised that our efforts in cleaning up were noticed by a reporter for Forbes. Hong Kong has an opportunity to meet this challenge (and we think some really great people, the skills, resources and experience to do it), or to continue to pass the buck. Either way, it will be noticed by the world: <http://www.forbes.com/sites/jnylander/2015/05/11/nature-is-speaking-to-hong-kong-and-you-urgently-need-to-listen/>. It is important that those who are on board the ship are given a positive reason to change their ways. A visit from a Hong Kong megastar (Chow Yun Fat, for example) as Hong Kong's Ocean Ambassador would really make their day, as well as ongoing support (rather than finger pointing and blaming).

And finally, a song for your members to keep in their heads from the kids at the Harbour School, Hong Kong: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xlqi58MV3yQ>

Best regards

Jo

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