

'Bag it, bin it' project sparks spirited wave to keep provincial beaches clean

Colourful, reusable bags on-hand for beach lovers to pick up trash

MIKE LOEWE

Eastern Cape seaside communities are starting to take action in the battle against a swathe of plastic waste washing up on our beaches.

At Kwelera village, a smart bin box built from recycled plastic, with seven colourful locally printed bags hanging off the side and a board explaining the beach clean-up project, represents a permanent community strategy.

Beach lovers grab a colourful bag sewn from Da Gama off-cuts, as they head out, and pick up plastic as they go.

On their return, they empty the plastic into the bin, and clip the bag back on the row ready for the next good citizen.

This new project — run by a local group of residents working with the Kwelera National Botanical Garden and SA National Biodiversity Institute (Sanbi), decided the project would run alongside sporadic organised beach cleanups.

The plastic gathered by the "Bag it, bin it, bring it back" project is then taken to a refuse site at the Sanbi complex and collected for recycling by Land of the Living.

Activists are watching closely

to see if the new forever available bag-it, bin-it system will change public behaviour and make an impact on the crisis.

Janette Bennett, writer, journalist, sewer and artist, said she was inspired by a project she saw at Cannon Rocks recently.

She said of the Kwelera project: "The bags are being supplied by a few local people.

"The bright and active colour scheme was the result of end cloth used to clean the rollers before another design was printed.

"It was cost-effective, handy and fun to work with.

"And there were others in the village volunteering to sew the bags.

"We have realised there are many different ways to tackle beach litter — beach cleanups and a project like this are different activities but have the same goal.

"So organised beach cleanups are effective, but the beauty of the new project is that every single beach visitor can make a difference every single day."

Kwelera village is within the botanical garden, launched by Sanbi in 2014.

Plastic waste has been an issue, and the botanical garden's curator, horticulturist Nomama Mei, said the grab-a-bag project was a wonderful addition to the cleanup work already being done by staff.



FIRST RESPONDER: Dean Knox from Jonginenge Eco-Adventure gets stuck into cleaning up some of the hundreds of plastic bottles and debris washed down the Nahoon river after Sunday night's rain. Picture: ALAN EASON

Bennett said waste arriving on the coast was a mix of local and global — some was litter hurled off ships passing by,

some were local brands coming down rivers.

Common items were drinks bottles, containers and plastic

teaspoons.

Blue plastic earbuds and the tough neck rings below the lids of plastic bottles are lethal to sea

life. The rings get jammed around seabirds' necks and webbed feet. Fishing line, broken off when

anglers get hooked up, is also found tightly wound around marine animals.

Most of these are "forever" plastics, which never really break down.

They finally become microplastics, which today are being found everywhere, even in human bodies, and pose a silent threat.

The project is only a few days old and the early impacts are positive so far.

Bennett said residents were posting on the village WhatsApp group that the beaches were looking cleaner than before.

Surfer and businessman Darrin Varnfield, 60, a Kwelera village resident for 15 years, is a driver of the project.

He said the villagers had become sick of seeing all the plastic on the beach.

"People want nothing more than to have a bag to pick up plastic.

"This will become a way of life.

"People have been wanting to do something about it and now the facility is right at hand.

"The community is stoked to be setting up the project.

"Kwelera is a jewel on our East Coast and keeping it pristine is a priority on everybody's mind. Now we can do it."

He invited any residents along the coast to contact him

and his working group.

"We would love to see this happening all along our coast. The interest is there."

Resident and former Green Scorpions leader Dr Div de Villiers, said: "What has struck me during the seven years that I have called Kwelera home is the community spirit where every resident brings something unique to make the village and its beautiful surroundings a special place to live in.

"Unfortunately, plastic pollution cannot be controlled by the residents because it washes on to the beaches and rocks from far afield, mainly from nearby rivers.

"We know the state does not have the resources to clean the beaches, even though they're bordered by a national botanical garden.

"But rather than sitting idly criticising the government and allowing litter to accumulate, the community banded together to initiate this cleanup strategy with Sanbi's support.

"Janette Bennett and Darrin Varnfield were the drivers, but without full community buy-in, such projects eventually fail.

"Kwelera is one of the very few Eastern Cape examples that I know of that truly shows the ubuntu culture.

"It is this united effort that keeps the village clean and beautiful."

Plastic treaty seems far away as global leaders lobby and wrestle

MIKE LOEWE

Global post-war anxiety over the ballooning of plastic pollution on land, in the sea and skies of planet Earth was finally acknowledged by governments in 1992 when the UN adopted the Rio declaration on environment and development.

Fast forward by 34 years to March 16 to a letter penned by the UN leader tasked with forging an international "instrument" to drastically reduce global pollution.

Chile's ambassador to the UN, Julio Cordano, summarised their progress: "At the moment, the INC [Intergovernmental Negotiating Committee] does not have a single draft text to work on..."

Cordano had been in the chair of the UN Environment Programme (Unep's) Intergovernmental Negotiating Committee (INC) on plastic pollution for just over a month, having been elected in Geneva on February 7.

In his acceptance speech he set the tone saying: "Plastic pollution is a planetary problem that affects every country, community and individual.

"Therefore, a treaty is urgently needed to support concerted action and bring us together to address this shared responsibility.

"I am willing and determined to play a leading role in helping the committee cross the finish line."

History is not on Cordano's side. Global concerns over the degrading environment started getting on the boil 53 years ago in 1973.

On March 2, 2022, the UN's Environment Assembly finally adopted the critical resolution 5/14 headlined: "End plastic pollution: towards an international legally binding instrument."

But four years later, Cordano was chivving the global players about no progress.

On March 16, he penned a "second letter" stating: "Special consideration should be given to the fact that, at the moment, the INC does not have a single draft text to work on, as a common reference for discussing the different elements of our negotiations.

"In my view, this represents a significant limitation that we will need to address in a timely manner."

The UN has been active in trying to raise the alarm.

Resolution 5/14 makes the point that global conventions and "instruments" seeking to "prevent plastic pollution and its related risks to human health and adverse effects on human wellbeing and the environment" began with the 1973 international convention for the

prevention of pollution from ships.

The resolution then lists a 49-year stretch which had seen the adoption of at least four protocols, seven conventions, and even a "strategic approach" to chemicals management" to get to resolution 5/14.

This welter of international promises, agreements, and commitments started out with the trashy behaviour of ships in 1973.

The slew of agreements that followed tried to regulate the disposal of general hazardous waste, then specifically chemicals and pesticides, and marine pollution "by dumping of wastes and other matter".

It included the establishment of the UN Framework on Climate Change responsible for the annual COP climate conferences, now criticised for being deluged with fossil fuel

industry lobbyists.

The resolution ends the list with the convention on biological diversity.

All is not lost in the struggle for a plastics treaty, according to Cordano, who in his recent letter heaps praise on "members that hold divergent positions" a lot of "informal discussions".

However, in the typically diplomatic language of the UN, he "encourages" governments involved in the wrangling to "share relevant outcomes" and to act in "a manner consistent with the inclusive nature of this process".

And so, while global leaders crawl along through the decades to strike up that elusive plastic treaty, there is probably more inspiration to be drawn from communities who have decided to damn well pick it up themselves.



POLLUTION: Plastic polluting a mangrove area lies at Panama Bay in Panama City, Panama. Picture: REUTERS/ ENEA LEBRUN

Picking trash off the beaches begs question: why's there so much?

MIKE LOEWE

It can seem like an insurmountable task to pick up trash lining our coastline at a time when the plastic manufacturing industry is intending to triple its output of fossil-fuel derived plastic by 2050.

Locally, the public interest group Green Ripple, formed during the widespread protest in 2020 against Shell's seismic blasting the Wild Coast ahead of drilling for oil and gas, welcomed the launch of the Kwelera Village community project.

Spokesperson Kevin Harris said: "We celebrate the Kwelera Village's 'Bag it, bin it, bring it home' project launched recently.

"It carries the seed of public agency and builds resistance to our apparently unstoppable descent into a plastic-choked world.

"When people start to reach down and put their hands on this trail of shoreline trash, we believe they are also grasping the deep meaning of the plastic manufacture and distribution system which seems to put economic extraction ahead of life.

"Yet for our very survival we need to focus on a plastic-free or circular economy where almost no more plastic is manufactured.

"We encourage all communities to create their own counter-system for removing fossil-fuel derived plastic from the environment."

Greenpeace Africa's plastics campaigner Gerance Mutwol, writing from Nairobi, said life on Earth faced a triple planetary crisis of climate change, pollution and biodiversity loss.

Plastic is common to all three. Global production of plastic doubled from 2000 to 2019 to 460 million tonnes — and without public action and pressure on decision-makers, could reach 1,380 million tonnes by 2050.

He said climate change — long-term shifts in weather patterns and temperatures, was causing "the most pressing global environmental crises of the century," contributing greatly to frequent extreme weather events across the world — such as the widespread floods across Africa in recent months.



PUBLIC INVITE: From left, Kwelera Village residents Janette Bennett and Storm Sasha Makanjee with Kwelera Botanical Gardens curator Nomama Mei pictured with the innovative beach plastic pick-up station. The bags are being made by Bennett and friends. Picture: MIKE LOEWE

The global south, according to the UN, bore a heavier brunt because it did not have the same resources as wealthier countries to respond to climate impacts.

Plastic pollution was making the crisis in Africa worse.

About 99 percent of plastic began as a fossil fuel.

Carbon dioxide and other

greenhouse gases were emitted at each stage throughout plastic's life cycle from the drilling of oil and the process of burning gases called flaring, which released harmful greenhouse gases such as methane and carbon dioxide.

Plastic manufacture required a lot of diesel, which also emitted greenhouse gases.

The final stage of the plastic production system was pollution.

Plastic waste ended in landfill, rivers, oceans and soil, breaking down into microplastics and, again, emitting greenhouse gases back to the atmosphere.

Plastic pollution harmed wildlife and contributed to bio-

diversity loss in both water and land ecosystems.

"The skyrocketing production of plastics is driving oil and gas demand.

"It is not surprising then, that so many new oil and gas projects are popping up across the continent.

"For example, in the Congo forest, a large patch of the lush forest is about to be auctioned to pave the way for oil exploration and drilling activities.

"These activities will lead to loss of habitat for birds and other forest animals and also affect the indigenous communities living in the forest."

Ocean ecosystems keeping biodiversity alive were being broken down by offshore oil exploration, drilling and transport.

"A few years ago, an oil tanker leaked oil in Mauritius' ocean waters, leading to the death of fish and other ocean plants and animals.

"Whales and other big marine animals have been washed ashore with their bellies full of plastics, the indigestible nature of plastics gives a feeling that

they are full and in turn they die of starvation."

Birds were photographed with plastic pollution wrapped around beaks, wings and legs "making them immobile and unable to feed themselves and they end up dying".

Plastic floating in the oceans had led to marine species hitching a ride, causing species to invade oceans beyond their native grounds, causing havoc in the ocean ecosystem.

Plastic finding its way into soil through littering and plastic-infused fertilisers was limiting plants' ability to absorb nutrients, causing stunted growth and wilting.

He wrote that less than 10% of all plastic ever produced has been recycled, "the other 90% is floating around in the environment either in the soil, air or water ways.

"Plastic has been found in the deepest and highest part of the continent and no ecosystem has been left untouched."

According to the Tearfund report, during the rainy season it was estimated that 218 million of the world's poorest peo-

ple were at risk from more severe and frequent flooding caused by plastic waste.

In Mombasa, Kenya, plastic pollution had created a ground for virus-carrying mosquito larvae that caused illness.

Plastics being burnt at landfills in most African countries were polluting the air, causing respiratory diseases and worsening the climate crisis.

He said total plastic production had to be cut by at least 75% by 2040 "to meet the 1.5°C target for our climate and to protect our health and the human rights of our communities".

Greenpeace Africa urged people to start to bring down "the whole lifecycle of plastics from extraction to disposal.

"Keep oil and gas used to make plastics in the ground and demand big brands to switch to refill and reuse systems and reduce single-use plastic production.

"Hold countries accountable for managing their own waste and ending waste colonialism.

"Ensure a just transition for workers and the health of the most affected communities."