

New narratives on marine debris

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Indonesia has a major marine debris problem on its hands. It has held a reputation as being the second-biggest marine polluter in the world, responsible for around 200,000 tons of plastic waste per year, as reported in a 2015 study by Jenna Jambeck.

However, despite its bad record on marine pollution, Indonesia has since shown its firm commitment to cleaning up its waters. As per the National Action Plan on Marine Debris launched in June 2017, the government has set an ambitious target of 70 percent waste reduction by 2025.

Still, such a commitment is not without challenges. At the heart of Indonesia's strategic interventions for addressing marine debris is behavioral change focusing on waste management. Prioritizing campaigns to inspire individuals to reduce, reuse and recycle plastic waste is thus essential in tackling marine debris.

A list of campaign initiatives on marine debris initiated by both the government and NGOs has been recorded. "Gerakan Indonesia Diet Kantong Plastik" (plastic bag diet movement) is one of them.

Started in 2013, it calls on central and local governments to enact a regulation to reduce plastic bag use, retailers to actively encourage customers to refuse plastic bags and consumers to bring their own reusable grocery bags when they go shopping. Similarly, the "No Straw Movement" initiated by youth organization Divers

Clean Action has been active in spreading awareness to stop using plastic straws.

Other popular campaign activities on marine debris are beach cleanups. In August last year, the Maritime Affairs and Fisheries Ministry in collaboration with NGOs and local government organized a coastal cleanup called "Menghadap Laut" (facing the sea) in 19 places. Involving more than 20,000 volunteers, it collected around 360 tons of waste.

Similarly, Bali hosted "One Island One Voice", an annual event initiated by youth-driven social initiative Bye Bye Plastic Bag.

Today's marine debris eradication campaigns are interesting due to the narratives they created. That way, we would be able to explore the best formula to induce more public involvement.

There are at least two issues that merit observation related to the campaigns: how the problems are communicated, and the desired behavior required (calls for action).

In communicating the impacts of marine debris, images of littered beaches, animals' ingestion of plastic waste or being trapped in plastic debris have been widely used. Presenting tangible impacts is undoubtedly easier to make people understand the problems rather than other impacts such as human health and economic impacts. This, however, could portray marine debris as a "distant" threat, which will discourage public engagement.

With calls for action, the campaigns have reinforced themes on reducing single-use plastics and taking part in cleanup activities. However, in the Indonesian context, those actions do not suffice due to improper waste disposal and littering practices.

As reported by the World Bank, littering and illegal dumping, particularly in low income areas such as in floating settlements, remain rampant and are listed as one of the main sources of land-based leakage.

So what should the future campaign narratives on marine debris look like?

It is indeed fundamental to educate people about the entire "marine debris journey" — that marine debris comes from us, humans are the source and every individual (wherever he or she lives) has the power — and responsibility — to prevent it.

The second foundational issue is emotional appeal.

The "Makassar Tidak Rantasa" (Makassar is not dirty) program initiated by the Makassar mayor is an example of the power of emotional appeal to foster public participation.

Applying the cultural norms articulated in local language, the narrative has successfully built a sense of shared identity which serves as a motivating force to the city residents to practice good waste management.

Finally, when people have grasped the marine debris issue, recognized that change is needed and become intent upon adjusting their own behavior, that is

when "calls for action" come in. They guide people to "do" something about the situation.

Marine debris is an issue far bigger than saying no to a plastic bag at the store checkout counter, refusing a plastic straw, or participating in beach cleanups. The public needs to be educated that being part of the solution in tackling marine debris requires transformative behavior in the way we manage our waste.

Quitting single use plastic is one thing. Behavior change campaigns should also advocate antilittering movements, encourage waste sorting and recycling practices.

Communicating about marine debris is relatively easy due to its tangible impacts. However, oversimplifying the issue and pointing to simple fixes could lead to misconceptions that would prevent desired changes.

Marine debris is indeed a complex issue risking our marine environment as well as our health and economy, but there are ways to cut those risks. Communicating about marine debris should enlighten people about the issue while making them feeling hopeful and empowered to take part in the solution.

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