

Saving the World One Microplastic at a Time

Activity Article: **Saving the World One Microplastic at a Time**

text by: Amelia Lau, SJI International School

photos by: Lisa Lim

Picking up trash. Not exactly something a 12-year-old wants to spend her weekend doing. But here I was seated on a small boat on my way to Pulau Ubin to do just that. I had to do community service to earn points for my school's service programme so my dad contacted Aunty Lisa, who leads these mangrove and coastal clean-ups at Pulau Ubin, to sign my family and I up as volunteers. And that's how we ended up going to the island of Pulau Ubin to pick up styrofoam and get eaten alive by mosquitoes. Fun.

Gazing at the lush, emerald plants and trees rolling past the windows of the silver van taking us from the island's village to its forest, I simply couldn't comprehend why anyone would want to cut down this wild, green forest. When the ride came to an end, everyone leapt off the vans and began the trek to the beach. The air was hot and sticky. Within minutes, beads of sweat began rolling down my forehead. Tiny bugs landed on my skin intent on devouring my blood.

"Watch your step!" called the other volunteers as we approached small mounds of boar poo. I grimaced as I accidentally stepped into a stinky "gift". Could this get any worse? Evidently it could for as I turned, a branch promptly thwacked me in the face.



The horrible sight of trash all over the beach.

I gasped as I glimpsed the glittering blue-grey sea and powdery, white beach through dense branches, but I wasn't focused on the scenery. Rather, my attention was glued on the brightly coloured wrappers, chunks of styrofoam, and the millions, perhaps even billions, of micro-plastics and even the occasional fork scattered on the beach. How was humanity capable of so much waste? If this was just on one beach, I shuddered to think of how much trash there was beneath the crashing waves.



Volunteers clearing and recording the trash found.

We were first split into groups. Aunt Lisa then explained how to categorize each piece of rubbish on a sheet of paper. Leaving my mum to puzzle over the paper, my brother and I raced off to pick and gather the marine litter. We proceeded down to the beach salvaging broken glass bottles, fraying ropes, soggy cushions and even an old flip-flop! After a while, the novelty wore off and the only things I found were tiny pieces of micro-plastics. Nonetheless, I dutifully dug through the dirt for colourful microplastics, wondering how it was possible that humans could use so much plastic



Collecting microplastics and other miniscule pieces of trash.

An hour later, everyone gathered to weigh the bags of rubbish. We had gathered more than 130 kilograms of marine trash! *Whoa*. I somehow felt proud knowing I had helped in this effort to clean the beach. Then, my dad promptly burst my bubble, mentioning that with each tide, more trash would be washed up on the beach. *Seriously?!* It was obvious. We had to do a LOT more recycling, consciously beginning with reducing and reusing.



Volunteers weigh the trash. The total weight of trash cleared that day was 130kg!

Sea foam sprayed my face as I leaned out of the boat's door to catch a glimpse of the receding island. I had helped to clear Pulau Ubin's beach of trash even if it was only until the next tide of rubbish came in. Strangely, I realized that had been far more fun than I had expected, and I looked forward to doing it again. I wondered then, if every human made an effort to clear the beaches and seas, would they be clear by now? Maybe that was what everyone needs to do: Save the world one microplastic at a time.



Amelia (front row, right, in coral pink shirt) and volunteers of the Coastal Clean-up at Pulau Ubin.

**Amelia Lau is a young girl from New Zealand who is currently residing in Singapore with her parents. It was her first time to Pulau Ubin and her first time involved in a coastal clean-up. But it will not be her last as she and her younger brother, Isaac, were so impacted and influenced by what they had learnt during the activity that they both want to do more for the environment and be involved in future clean-ups.*