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Oct 22, 2004

**Clean, Green S'pore? Not the beaches**

By Radha Basu

900 bins worth of litter retrieved from beaches here - in just 1 1/2 hours SINGAPORE'S tree-lined streets may be renowned the world over for their cleanliness, but the state of its beaches and mangroves tells a different story.

In a recent beach clean-up, about 2,000 volunteers retrieved a staggering nine tonnes of rubbish - enough to fill about 900 bins - in about 1 1/2 hours.

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While the authorities pointed out that the rubbish could have floated across from neighbouring countries, volunteers say that on the beaches at least, the bulk of the litter - non-biodegradable cigarette butts and plastic items - seems to have been discarded by picnickers too lazy to take the short walk to the nearest bin.



**LOADS OF RUBBISH:** Volunteers from schools and environment organisations picked up close to 90,000 pieces of litter during a coastal clean-up which covered eight beaches and three mangrove areas.

As part of the International Coastal Cleanup Singapore held on Sept 18, volunteers from schools and environment organisations picked up close to 90,000 pieces of litter, roughly two-thirds from the beaches alone.

The clean-up covered eight beaches and three mangrove areas.

The annual campaign aims to gain insights into the extent and content of the rubbish that turns up on shores worldwide.

**MANGROVES UNDER THREAT**

SINGAPORE'S mangrove swamps such as Chek Jawa and Kranji Buloh - little islands of sylvan charm in an otherwise urban landscape - are perhaps most under threat from coastal rubbish.

Unlike beaches, which are filled with cigarette butts and picnic litter, mangroves are often affected by heavier debris - including big

Held here since 1992, the clean-up - part of an international effort in more than 70 countries - is coordinated by the Raffles Museum of Biodiversity Research (RMBR) and the Nature Society.

This year's results show the situation is deteriorating. The amount of litter picked up has been rising steadily - from about

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drums and tyres - that is often washed ashore by strong winds and tides.

Also unlike the beaches, the mangroves are not cleaned regularly. A staggering three tonnes of rubbish were recovered from Kranji Buloh alone in the clean-up last month.

Plastic bags, which can survive rough seas and float hundreds of kilometres, are another major bane.

Nature Society president Geh Min said the environmental impact of coastal rubbish is potentially devastating to the fragile plant and marine life in the mangroves.

'Mangroves are the spawning grounds for a lot of marine and coral life, so if they are damaged, our other marine areas will also be affected,' she said.

66,000 pieces in 2002, to 74,000 last year and close to 90,000 this year.

'It's amazing how we have so much rubbish on our beaches, despite our image of being a very clean country,' said Mr N. Sivasothi of RMBR, country coordinator of this year's clean-up.

'If you take a photograph on East Coast Park, you can probably get half a dozen litter bins in a single frame. Yet, all the trash is not ending up in the litter bins,' said Mr Sivasothi.

Not surprisingly, the popular East Coast Park picnic spot was one of the dirtiest, with about 15,000 pieces of litter being picked up by volunteers, despite the park being cleaned twice a day between May and October.

The National Environment Agency, which oversees the cleanliness of the beaches here, claims much of the rubbish that ends up here is 'flotsam that originated from neighbouring seas and was washed up on Singapore's beaches by strong winds and tides'.

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A detailed study of the litter, however, indicates otherwise.

'We found close to 12,000 cigarette butts on the beaches and only around 10 in the mangroves, which are less accessible,' said Ms Airani Hamli, a volunteer, who spent nearly a month identifying and collating data on the rubbish picked up by volunteers.

'Much of the trash is definitely a result of recreational activities on our shores,' she said.

Conservationists say that bickering over where the litter comes from should not be the focal point of the campaign.

Earlier this year, United Nations Secretary-General Kofi Annan announced that rubbish, mainly plastic, kills more than a million sea birds and 100,000 mammals and sea turtles worldwide every year.

'Whether the plastic that chokes them is from Malaysia, Indonesia or Singapore makes no difference to our sea animals,' said conservationist Grant Pereira. 'They die anyway.' -- For details on the coastal clean-up, log on to [coastalcleanup.nus.edu.sg](http://coastalcleanup.nus.edu.sg)

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