

## Nichole's take on ...

# Managing waste like we mean it

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“Landfilling waste has economic and environmental costs and action is urgent and needed at all levels” is the obvious conclusion drawn from recent research carried out by university students from Seychelles and Switzerland as our environment-championing country starts to buckle under the weight of the trash we generate.

Whilst the local media oozed enthusiasm over the presentation of findings from the three-week intensive research programme on solid waste management by students from UniSey and ETH Zürich made to a parterre of local intellectuals and top knobs, one could hardly hold off the cynicism. Why has it taken so long for our country to carry out some serious research on the problems that waste can cause to our pristine tourist-loving environment? And why has it been left to undergraduate students from abroad to join ranks with our own to get the job done?

In their study of what we do with our waste, the undergraduates provided answers to basic questions like how we “govern” waste management, what waste we produce and how much of it we import, export and most importantly, dump. They looked at our perception and concerns as consumers and even looked at the future of landfilling in Seychelles in the light of the environmental impacts of the Providence landfill despite us knowing a great deal already about the smell it offers and the fire hazards posed on the site. The students also considered whether a biogas reactor would be feasible even if government already put out the tender for a plant several years ago. They naturally considered opportunities for recycling at least some of this waste.

But without detracting from the importance of the students' hard work, they were, by and large stating the obvious.

They found that because the so-called pre-treatment of waste isn't working, our trash is indeed having an environmental impact, having found evidence of landfill leachate carrying zinc, ammonia and other toxic chemicals into surrounding water bodies. They warned that this leachate must be treated because it may have severe environmental consequences that could even compromise the fishing industry. They underscored the need to optimise recycling markets and urged government to support combined aluminium, PET plastics and glass collection by creating markets for recycled products.

Government, they urged, must set up a clear “legal and institutional framework” that could apply across the board and it could begin by reviewing the existing deposit and levy scheme, and providing better environmental education. But more importantly, government must develop a long-term disposal solution for the leachate, they recommended.

The irony was not lost when environment officials piled on praise for the students' team work done in the spirit of partnership although they failed to admit that having been charged with protecting us from our trash, they had let us down. That it had been left to university students to state the obvious, years after we had already become aware of the environmental hazards our increased consumption levels were creating, is an achievement in itself.

Admitting that the study had proven ‘various presumptions to be a fact,’ the environment department's top gun promised his department would “take a few steps.”

“We will keep working on specific regulations to tackle these issues,” he said, going on to promise programmes to address specific types of waste such as plastic bags. He conveniently omitted to explain how the Waste Management Fund, which he chairs by law, was created back in 2007 and tasked with funding waste management initiatives in line with his department's policy. He didn't explain how well or otherwise his department had done in managing the PET recycling scheme nor whether they had been able to assist in sensitising the public in waste management issues.

His admission that now, almost ten years later, he will also “work on collection of information which is required for good decision-making in environment management,” sounds like an admission of failure and dereliction of duty.

The key message to emerge from the study, our environmental chief said, was that immediate action was needed ‘now that people were very interested in waste and willing to help in keeping the country clean.’ He did warn though that “we can't just reduce waste by recycling” because “various other steps had to be taken.”

And those various steps, it seems, are what is always holding us back! The environmental department didn't dwell on the range of laws and regulations already in place to deal with waste. It made no mention of the regulations of certain types of plastic bags that it has never really applied. It said not a word about the littering regulations that remain bookmarks in the law books nor did it speak of the pollution regulations that, long overtaken by time and circumstance, are never read in our current environment. Of course now that the students have advised and recommended the obvious, perhaps we can hope for some real action in managing our waste. And this time hopefully, we will really mean it!