

Causes

Saving the oceans, one project at a time

In fast-paced Singapore, there are those in need – and those who go out of their way to meet these needs. This is part of a series on noteworthy causes *The Straits Times* is spotlighting.



Ms Jerrrie Liao, who took part twice in SMU's marine conservation project Reef Alert, is now part of a team that will pilot a plan to clean up Brunei's Jerudong Beach and study the type and source of the rubbish found there. PHOTO: TEMASEK HOLDINGS

Cara Wong

When avid scuba diver Jerrrie Liao started her undergraduate days at Singapore Management University (SMU) two years ago, she wanted to participate in its annual marine conservation project Reef Alert because it involved diving with sharks. But during a two-week trip to the Philippines to collect data on thresher sharks, she found herself drawn to the central cause of the project. "While we were there, we saw a community whose whole focus was on the survival of the thresher sharks and the ecosystem," said the 21-year-old.

"I realised then that we can't see humans as being separate from the ecosystem; we are very much embedded into our environment."

The social sciences student ended up taking part in the project twice – once as a participant and once as a project leader.

Determined to do more for the cause after Reef Alert ended its run this year, she then applied to take part in a workshop focusing on the issue of marine debris in the region.

Thanks to her leadership experience with Reef Alert, Ms Liao was accepted and was one of three Singaporeans who took part in the workshop, which involved participants from around South-east Asia.

She is now part of a team that will pilot an initiative to clean up the polluted Jerudong Beach in Brunei and carry out research on the type and source of the rubbish found there.

Five others – from Malaysia, Indonesia, Brunei and Singapore – make up the team.

Their plan, which will take about six months to carry out, was selected by a panel of judges at the workshop. The team will present it again to a wider audience at the Our Ocean Conference Youth Leadership Summit in Bali, Indonesia, next month.

Ms Liao hopes that the project will provide information to help the local authorities better plan their waste management systems and inspire others to look after their environment. Currently, Jerudong Beach has only one waste bin.

"Because this is a community-driven project, it can be done by laymen, so we could use this as a way to allow people to feel a sense of ownership and get them to take better care of their waters and area," said Ms Liao.



Ms Liao presenting her team's action plan at this year's Young South-east Asian Leadership Initiative workshop in Jakarta. Her teammates are (from left) Mr Mogesh Sababathy, 20, from Malaysia; Mr Rizal Bahri, 23, from Indonesia; Ms Emily Yong, 25, from Brunei; Ms Wong Zi Ni, 22, from Malaysia; and Mr Yeo Zhi Yi, 23, from Singapore. PHOTO: COURTESY OF JERRRIE LIAO



Ms Liao on a Reef Alert diving trip to Pulau Hantu earlier this year. "All environmental problems are a problem for humans. It will take a shift in everyone's mindset to help solve this problem," she said. PHOTO: COURTESY OF JERRRIE LIAO

The suggestion to focus on the beach came from her Bruneian teammate Emily Yong, 25, who is a marine biologist familiar with the situation there.

Along with their teammates, they are in talks with organisations in

Brunei and plan to execute the project in the coming months.

Should it prove successful, they could then implement the project in other coasts around the world, and hopefully impact a bigger community – including Singapore.

Apart from participating in overseas projects, Ms Liao also champions the cause locally. Last week, she spoke as a panellist at a student forum on sustainable development organised by Singapore investment firm Temasek Holdings.

A SINGLE ECOSYSTEM

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MS JERRRIE LIAO on how she found herself drawn to the central cause of the Reef Alert project while on a two-week trip to the Philippines to collect data on thresher sharks in December 2016.

CAUSES

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Said Mr Robin Hu, head of Temasek's sustainability and stewardship group: "All the student panellists were selected because they showed passion and tenacity in wanting to build a sustainable future for all. Ms Liao showed how young people can both enjoy a hobby and make it a part of a cause, through her participation in a thresher shark study."

Ms Liao believes that regardless of where the problems originate, there is a need for greater global co-operation to help solve them.

"All environmental problems are a problem for humans," said Ms Liao, noting that the plastic in seas could eventually end up in people's diets through seafood.

"It will take a shift in everyone's mindset to help solve this problem. We have to relook how we conduct our lives and our societies."

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