



Waterways Watch Society

*KEEPING SINGAPORE'S
WATERS CLEAN*

For years, littering has contaminated Singapore's waterways – the chief source of its drinking water. The Waterways Watch Society, an independent organisation of volunteers, is determined to raise awareness of the problem and to build a culture of environmentally responsible behaviour. **Eugene Heng**, the Society's Chairman, explains how they do this.





The Challenge

Over the years, there has been a rise in the pollution of Singapore's waterways. All of its waterways are interlinked through extensive networks of shallow drains that lead to deeper canals, large rivers and eventually, the present 17 reservoirs island-wide. Precious water collected is then treated before being supplied as ready-to-drink water to taps in homes and buildings.

Littering is the main cause of such pollution. The costliest evidence of this is the clean-up of the Singapore River in 1987, which spanned 10 years and cost about S\$300 million (US\$239.4 million). Now the rivers and canals are relatively clean, but littering and illegal disposal of waste are still taking place. In view of the economic and environmental costs of pollution, effective management of the environment ranks as a key concern for the

Singapore government. Building the framework and infrastructure for a clean environment falls to the government, but sustaining it and ensuring the responsible use of such facilities falls on the people.

Formed in 1998 to raise public awareness on the importance of keeping Singapore's waterways clean, the Waterways Watch Society (WWS) is an independent volunteer group that also rallies the public to help clean up the waterways. Instead of aggressively recruiting members, we focus on spreading the message of environmental awareness and cleanliness to attract passionate, like-minded individuals to join us. So far in the course of our work, we have interacted with about 150 schools out of over 400 locally, and some 100 companies out of thousands in Singapore. What's worrying is that 90% of our participants do not have prior knowledge of the litter problem affecting our drinking water in the reservoirs. This means that an even larger population group may be unaware of this problem.

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01 Litter in one of the rivers monitored by the Waterways Watch Society.



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The Solution

Over the years, the WWS has diversified its activities to include boat, bicycle and kayak patrols; beach clean-ups; environmental camps; water-monitoring programmes and customised programmes like Learning Trails for schools and corporates. In 2013 alone, our programmes expanded to include the Marina Bike Learning Trail, the Eco-Kayak Learning Trail and the Waterways Watch Explorer programme. This diversification of activities enables us to reach out to people with different backgrounds, interests and needs. It also offers our volunteers different avenues to contribute to our environment.



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01 Kayak patrol volunteers removing litter.

02 Youths learning how to test water quality.

03 Participants in the Waterways Watch Explorer programme.

We strongly believe in the importance of partnerships with government agencies, schools, corporates and other organisations to effectively raise awareness about, and encourage participation in, environmental and water conservation. We share observations of water issues with PUB, the national water agency, and land pollution issues with the National Environment Agency (NEA) and the National Parks Board (NParks). Since 2013, we have been sending select members who have shown dedication and commitment to their WWS volunteer duties for training as community volunteers with the NEA. Upon successful completion of this programme, such members are empowered to warn and issue fines to members of the public who are caught littering.

We rely on the collective expertise of small working committees within our society to develop, test and implement our programmes. As the majority of our volunteers have day jobs, this means programmes can take a longer time to develop. New programmes also take time to gain traction with our existing and potential community partners. As most of our programmes involve the outdoors, our programmes can be affected by inclement weather, the most impactful being the recent bouts of severe haze.

Sourcing for funding is also a continuous challenge for us. The good news is that we have recently gained approval as a charity with an Institution of Public Character status, which enables us to accept tax-deductible donations from the public.

We also face persistent challenges in our daily work. Often, we see events held around our reservoirs where participants leave litter, expecting public cleaners to pick up after them. We are continuously increasing our engagement via social media to spread awareness about the problems of littering and pollution, and how they adversely affect our waterways. We strongly advocate a national policy to support good social behaviour and kindness to the environment.





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The Outcome

Our approach to volunteer recruitment has garnered us steadfast volunteers who are passionate about environmental issues and actively participate in our programmes. From just 30-odd members when we started out, the WWS today has about 350 member volunteers. The growth in our membership and programmes has spurred the opening of our first branch at My Waterway@Punggol in March 2014. At Punggol, we hope to spread the message of keeping our waterways clean to more residents in the heartlands. We will also conduct briefings and organise patrols of the Punggol waterways.

Our work has been endorsed by PUB, the NEA and NParks over the past decade. Our environmental programmes have garnered us recognition from the public, the inaugural President's Award for the Environment (2006) and the inaugural PUB Watermark Honorary Award (2007).

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01 The Society depends on volunteers to develop, test and implement its programmes.

02 Gardening is one of the Society's activities that promotes hands-on involvement by participants.



01 To promote a culture of cleanliness, the Society has engaged some 150 schools in diverse ways, like the River Monster Programme.



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For each programme, we strive to leave a lasting impression with the participants by providing opportunities for hands-on involvement and facilitating a holistic understanding of conservation issues. Some participants subsequently joined us as WWS members. As climate change becomes more pronounced and the effects more directly felt, our programmes are ever more relevant. However, we still face problems such as the lack of funding. While there is always strong financial support for helping the poor, sick, underprivileged, unfortunate or elderly, environment care is often perceived to be the government's responsibility or something that will take care of itself.

For us, the continuing challenge is to get more people to become aware of the extent of the littering issue and more importantly, to form a culture of cleanliness. However, our awareness programmes are not enough. There need to be more initiatives and even mandatory requirements to inculcate environmentally responsible behaviour. Time is not on our side.

Eugene Heng is the founder and current Chairman of WWS, which has received the President's Award for the Environment and PUB's Watermark Honorary Award. Mr Heng is a member of the Public Hygiene Council and Singapore Water Network. He has served on advisory committees such as the Ministry of the Environment and Water Resources's Focus Group on Water.