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Including Sabah stopover on the second 5-year odyssey

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KOTA KINABALU: The trimaran of the Race for Water foundation that arrived here Monday as part of a 5-year odyssey dedicated to ridding the oceans and seas of plastic waste initially meant to skip Sabah enroute to Palawan from Jakarta.

The 20-day stopover of their spectacular all renewable energy powered 100-tonne 130ft long vessel is thanks to Swiss entrepreneur cum avid sailor Marco Simeoni and Marinah Embiricos. Marco saw the horrors in the oceans, sold his business to SwissCom at a fortune and decided to dedicated his life and money to build the trimaran which set sail for its maiden 5-year odyssey in April 2015.

The credit for including Sabah as part of its second 5-year odyssey to 38 destinations is thanks to Marinah Embiricos and her husband John.

Marinah, daughter of former Chief Minister Tan Sri Harris Mohd Salleh, grew up here but lived abroad.

“I came back to Sabah in 2014 and when I went swimming, there were awful plastic bottles floating around. I realised it was a mess and I thought wow, what if I am infected.

“So right then I said I was not going to just talk about it but see what we can do about it.” That gave rise to NOW – ‘No More Plastics in Our Waters.’

“I created a platform, a private-public partnership , I spoke to the Mayor then as well as the then Culture, Tourism and Environment Minister.

“I said ‘can we create this private public partnership platform so that we as a private sector can lobby and work with you together and see how we can solve this problem.’”

“Our goal was to reduce the marine litter.

“Since tourism is one of the largest income earners and very important to the government, I thought that’s a good lobbying platform with the government because they need to clean up the marine tourist spots to encourage more tourists.”

At first, it was skimming the plastics out of the water and selling them to recyclers. But there was a problem.

“They refused to buy the plastic waste because the quality of the plastics had already badly degraded and very dirty. So they said they had no use of it and didn’t want it.”

Marinah said they were not trying to make a profit, but to support picking up litter. However, the cost of just bringing the project was no longer feasible financially because “we had to pay the boatmen, petrol, etc, and there was no income”.

“We tried many things, even a boat to work with a Mantanani-based foundation run by a fellow named Fred. The idea was to pick up plastics from source such as Pulau Gaya or anywhere but even decent plastics not floating ones didn’t make financial sense.

“We tried to get DBKK’s help but nobody wanted to touch it or address it unless there is money in it,” Marinah said.

She said they then embarked on campaigns, putting recycling bins all over like in UMS, DBKK, court house, Jesselton Point, Sembulan, Pulau Gaya and UMS beach clean up through gotong royong.

One of the very important things they learnt in those three years is the need to deal with the problem at source. “We visited Kayu Madang waste management landfill and realised that it was a real mess with some legal problem between DBKK and the former company running it.

“We went to schools again and again to give talks about recycling and the importance of water and yes it brought awareness but it didn’t solve the problem,” Marinah said.

Marinah said like it or no, people still have to use plastics, because we don’t really have an alternative solution at the moment. “People still do their shopping and not many bring along recycle bags.”

So despite the known facts that plastics in the oceans which actually break down into small bits in less than one year by ultraviolet rays and release two toxic chemicals bisphenol (BHP) and PS oligomer that are carcinogenic and linked to infertility in both males and females even at low levels, the popularity of plastics remains very difficult to beat simply because plastic containers won’t break unlike containers made of glass.

But a determined Marinah wasn’t going to give up the fight.

“Given that skimming and public awareness both didn’t work, we thought, let’s look at the technology that actually could take most wastes not just plastics but 90pc of the wastes, some machines could even take 98pc. Other than stones, you can bring it into this big independent power plant (IPP) and create it into energy,” she said.

Four years ago, she took them to several companies and I brought them to the mayor's office, the Mayor and State said "wow, this is too expensive, it's about RM200 million, what if it doesn't work?"

"We were trying all these different options and RM200 million is too much of an investment and that's when I met the founders of Race for Water," Marinah recalled.

"So we met up with the founder of Race for Water, Marco Simeoni through a very good friend of ours who worked with Marco.

"Marco is a businessman, he had a company which he sold for a lot of money to SwissCom and he is a keen and avid sailor and he found terrible plastic pollution all over the world.

"He wanted to do something and gave a lot of his own money – millions into this foundation," Marinah noted.

"They have done a lot, they have spent millions to understand the problem and found that 80pc of the marine debris plastics are floating everywhere around the world and how to get rid of it?

"The only solution is, where you can take this plastic and turn it into something else and since plastics has got pyrolytic value (thermal degradation process that changes waste to energy), you can transform it into energy and basically this mean converting it into syngas," she explained.

What they came up with was a little container size model machine and technology that they are going around the world promoting experimenting and has taken them years to get it working with a group called ICLEI (International Council for Local Environmental Initiatives – a global network of cities "I have met with all these groups, they have been working on this for years – how do we solve the plastics problem in small modular systems without spending millions and millions," Marinah pointed out.

"So we believed this is a good model and then when I found out that oh, if it costs 350,000 euros, maybe a few groups can get together, or maybe we also can get some grants to try it out, just pilot test it.

If it really works, wow, then we can replicate it

Hence, the reason the trimaran is going around the world in this second 5-year long odyssey is not only to look at the plastic pollution and do scientific research but also inspire coastal people to look at their solutions, Marinah said.

"This is why we are inviting some 40 schools to come on board, to get hundreds of children inspired because they are the future generation.

"The second goal of this 5-year expedition is to stop at each of the five trash gyres to see where are the worst polluting areas and find means to stop plastics from reaching water ways," she said.

She recalled reading in the National Geographic that all the plastic pollution are coming from the rivers. "If you look at the map, Malaysia is not a major polluter.

"The point is it is a build-up of our pollution outside and everywhere else, that is the problem so we should look at this, teach our children and continuously tell ourselves how do we deal with

this, how can we recycle and upcycle and be totally aware and if there is a solution , let's work together on coming up with solutions because we are drowning in plastics whether we like it or not.