

Let's give the Earth some breathing space

December 14, 2008

Gulf News began the year 2008 with the 'No to Plastic Bags' campaign, in response to hundreds of dying camels and gazelles in the desert from eating plastic bags.

Readers, environmentalists and businesses from around the UAE were roused into action. *Gulf News* took their energy seriously and channelled it into a transformational experience with the 'Go Green' campaign.

After six months of driving the initiative, the newspaper winds it down with the news that all its newsprint is from recycled fibre. But it is not abdicating responsibility and will continue to raise awareness on environmental practices.

The following is an overview of how the *Gulf News* drive has impacted communities, the environment and the nation.

Green initiative

The scourge of plastic bags led to *Gulf News*'s decision to take its corporate social responsibility further. It was time to tackle serious issues, starting from home. Whether it was the wastage of water, sewage dumping, littered beaches or polluted air — if it mattered to the environment, *Gulf News* brought it to readers' attention.

In an open letter to readers from the Editor-in-Chief Abdul Hamid Ahmad, the newspaper acknowledged the extent of its own impact on the environment and promised to endeavour, as well as to recognise the endeavours, of thousands around the country — of people who believed they could be part of the change.

One such person *Gulf News* recognised, was a man who worked to literally transform the face of the UAE — Shaikh Zayed. His vision for the country changed parts of the desert into a green oasis. *Gulf News* remembered the man who envisioned a green world long before being eco-friendly became a worldwide phenomenon.

It soon became apparent that there were plenty of eco-warriors in the UAE. The campaign rapidly gathered speed and *Gulf News* was able to capture the efforts of the authorities, individuals, businesses and groups around the country, as they worked together to build a better future.

No to plastic bags

Ignorance may often be blissful, but our dying planet is no laughing matter. As of March 2008, *Gulf News* decided to help right some wrongs by urging the nation to stop taking the Earth for granted.

Right from detailed picture galleries to in-depth reports on why plastic is a deathly serious issue, the newspaper endeavoured to keep the community well informed. On the subject of the environment, when readers asked 'why', *Gulf News* responded.

With weekly green facts, environmental news and best practices for sustainable living from across the world, the campaign provided readers with all-inclusive, comprehensive coverage on current and relevant green topics.

Once the 'No to Plastic Bags' campaign picked up steam — with organisations and individuals eager to make a difference — it was apparent that more could be done to make a significant, positive impact on our world.

Jute bags: So far, so good

Setting a trend and helping save the Earth simultaneously, *Gulf News* jute bags are now a common sight in supermarkets, retail stores and even schools around the UAE.

Distributed by the newspaper in late September, the bags provided a vibrant, green alternative for more than 100,000 subscribers, as part of *Gulf News's* Go Green campaign. The bags were given away free.

According to Rani Chouhan, an Indian expatriate and housewife living in Dubai, the smaller of the two jute bags is a favourite.

She said: "I often see people carrying the jute bags and I am thoroughly enjoying their use. They come in handy when I go to the fruit and vegetable market."

She added that her 14-year-old daughter Saloni was in the habit of using the bag to take books and folders to school.

Chouhan said: "I become quite nostalgic when using the bag, since it reminds me of my shopping experiences back in India."

Anil Kumar Singh, a Sharjah resident, agreed and said he appreciated the quality and appearance of the jute bags: "The jute bags prevent us from using at least 10 plastic bags a week and this ultimately adds up to a lot."

He urged supermarkets and large stores to follow suit in creating a change in shopping behaviour.

Singh said: "Often, supermarkets pose as a hindrance when consumers want to take their jute bags along. In fact, stores should be happy to accommodate eco-friendly alternatives."

Gauri Ramesh, a *Gulf News* reader of more than 10 years, said she often faced similar obstacles when shopping with her jute bag.

She said: "Some supermarkets have still not come to terms with eco-friendly alternatives to plastic bags. I am often asked to leave my jute bag outside before entering and it really irritates me."

While years of damage cannot be overturned with a single action, *Gulf News* took up the challenge with its jute bags to set the ball rolling for environmental change.

Ramesh agreed: "We keep the jute bags in our cars and take them to stores with us. It's a perfect way to stir families into saving their environment."

Readers' response

Participating in clean-up drives and weekly recycling runs and giving up the once-favoured plastic bag for ones made out of jute or cloth — when *Gulf News* readers fight for a cause, they are unstoppable.

With scores of green ideas and comments pouring into the mailbox, readers ensured that their voices were heard. While many vowed and were successfully able to switch to eco-friendly practices, others went a step further and found imaginative ways to 'green' their lifestyles.

Gulf News readers such as Rita Amer, were captured on video. A true eco-warrior, she explained how easy it was to practice composting in Mirdiff, Dubai, and how plastic bags could be replaced with special recyclable boxes. Mariam, a student of the Higher Colleges of Technology (HCT) Madinat Zayed campus, inspired 22 children to write short stories about the environment, when she took part in a campaign to highlight the harmful effects of plastic bags.

Others wrote in letters to *Gulf News* with inspirations. Suryakumaran Nair S. described how he was able to source water from his air-conditioner to cut down on water consumption bills.

As Earth Hour arrived, thousands of people around Dubai took *Gulf News's* lead and turned off their lights at 8pm on March 31 to show support for the planet.

Extraordinary responses from readers helped make the campaign a phenomenon.

Inspiring change

Gulf News's 'Go Green' campaign became a nation-wide success due to the enthusiasm and contribution of its readers. The same question seemed to resonate in the minds of eco-conscious individuals, organisations and communities around the UAE: what can we do to help?

Movers and shakers of the country — right from the authorities and multinational businesses to individuals — pushed the pedal on their creativity and found innovative ways to go green.

Gulf News brought their efforts to the forefront, so that each contribution became an inspiration for the next.

Government bodies and NGOs show the way

Complete support from the authorities meant a huge boost for Go Green. *Gulf News* highlighted practices around the country that pushed UAE higher up in green ranks.

From solar-panelled buildings to green rooftops, the authorities ensured that the country was on a steady upward path to being environmentally friendly in its endeavours.

The Estidama (sustainability) programme, launched in Abu Dhabi, centred on introducing mandatory green building laws and regulations in the Capital.

Saving water and conserving energy was the order of the day for the Dubai Electricity and Water Authority (Dewa). Dubai Municipality stepped in to deter residents from using plastic bags by stopping the practice of distributing garbage bags for free. The Municipality then took their efforts to a greater level with 'My Bag, My Earth' campaign.

Go Green received another great impetus when Bee'ah, the Sharjah Environment Company, set up recycling centres in convenient residential locations within the city.

Fujairah gave residents suitable solutions for their trash troubles as well, with recycling centres established at schools and universities.

Supermarkets and departmental stores readily jumped onto the bandwagon, with stores such as Abu Dhabi Cooperative Society (Adcoops) introducing oxo-biodegradable bags, which disintegrate within eight to 10 weeks of usage. Spinneys contributed by offering insulation bags for sale.

Aiming for environmental protection, Carrefour launched its own 'Small Change, Big Difference' campaign and urged customers to purchase a reusable cloth or jute alternative to plastic bags.

Others, such as Geant, donated proceeds of plastic bag sales to environmental groups, namely the Emirates Wildlife Society (EWS) and started awareness campaigns of their own.

Supermarket employees from Carrefour and MAF Hypermarkets joined forces with Emirates Diving Association and picked up over two tonnes of garbage from Dubai and Abu Dhabi beaches as part of the 'Clean up Arabia' campaign.

With EEG organising further successful clean-up campaigns and recycling drives, it became evident many people were willing to help.

But these are just a few of the environmentally conscious groups in the UAE. Seizing the opportunity to address issues close to their hearts, the number of helping hands seemed to double and triple with each initiative, thus leading the way to creating a greener, more active nation of eco-guardians.

Schools go eco-friendly

Along the way, *Gulf News* found that its youngest readers had the greenest thumbs. For students and pupils, it was all about teamwork — and the dynamism of UAE's youth was contagious.

The launch of an Anti-Plastic Squad helped fight the scourge of plastic bags, thanks to the Eco-Club at Our Own English High School, in Sharjah. Green Knights at the school also set out to make a difference, with the 'White Pollution Campaign'. Working on information dissemination and setting up environmental exhibitions, children made posters and learned about the crushing human impact on the world. Still others discovered creative ways to replace plastic bags with those made out of paper.

For the American Community School in Abu Dhabi, a Green Team was the ideal solution to ensuring pupils had enough recycling facilities and alternatives to plastic.

From across the emirates, in Ras Al Khaimah, pupils from the Indian High School did their bit for the environment by engaging in debates, holding presentations of the current environmental situation and cleaning up the beach.

Catching a whiff of the enthusiasm, Emirates Environmental Group (EEG) helped channel the energy of young eco-stars toward the green movement. With the Eighth Inter-School Public Speaking Competition, children from 92 schools competed to highlight critical issues related to the wellbeing of our planet, including the future of marine life and the overuse of plastic.

Another highlight for *Gulf News'* Go Green campaign occurred when 25 six-year-olds from Dubai International Academy sent in pointers on how to live a greener life. With letters offering practical tips on how to conserve water or reduce pollution, the littlest of the lot inspired their peers and adults to rebuild the world.

For some schools, saving the environment became part of the curriculum and pupils discovered that their holiday homework was greener than ever before.

Riding high on the tides of change, *Gulf News* was there to capture it all.

{Gulf News}