

Image: Yul Wenger



The Kenyan coast is a tropical paradise stained by the scourge of plastics, brought in by the tide and discarded by tourists: a local reflection of an alarming global epidemic. This plastic menace has grown rapidly over the past 30 years, to become the eyesore and environmental hazard of today. It reflects a swift increase in single-use plastic bottles, containers, cups and straws, with very little planning in terms of collection and recycling.

Something needs to change!

Now, one man is taking a stand. Yul Wenger, the owner of Yul's Aquadrom, which looks over Bamburi Beach, on the northern fringe of Mombasa city, is attempting to stimulate change, by showing what his business can do to tackle the plastic plague he sees every day. Dedicating himself to the cause, Yul is approaching the challenge from both ends, meaning he restricts his use of plastics, while attempting to clean and recycle the rubbish that is already there.

Yul's started up 30 years ago, way back when the Cold War was ending. It was a small business then, with plastic tables and chairs on a grassy mound above the beach and meals for less than a dollar! Nowadays Yul's provides a range of watersports activities and patrons sit in plush seats within the covered restaurant and bar. It has become the 'go-to' place on Kenya's North Coast. Yul acknowledges this and admits that his successful enterprise is part of the plastics problem, which he now wants to remedy.

At the input end, Yul's is moving to do away with single-use plastic bottles, cups and straws, in favour of recyclable or biodegradable items: drinks will only be available from glass bottles, while ice-cream cups and straws will be made from paper or corn starch. It is taking time to re-orient his suppliers and re-organise his business, but Yul is convinced that for the long-term future of his restaurant – and the environment his business depends on – it must be done!

At the other extreme, steps have already been taken to reduce and clean the litter on Bamburi Beach, which stretches for a kilometre, North and South of Yul's. Our environmentally conscious owner has built a unit for rubbish collection and introduced an inspirational scheme, whereby patrons take a wicker bag to fill with rubbish and on return (with a full bag) receive a free ice-cream. What a great idea to create awareness and stimulate practical action amongst those who visit the Aquadrom.

Image: Yul Wenger



Yul and Heike Wenger, next to the trash collection unit, in front of Aquadrom.

And Yul has another idea which would see the use of automated machinery to filter the sand and collect the rubbish. He is hopeful that the local authority might adopt such a scheme, which is already standard practice in other parts of the world.



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“The rubbish can be sorted and some of it, recycled,” he tells me, “While the seaweed can be harvested and turned into fertilizer, or organic fuel briquettes.”

His ideas are brilliant and need to be replicated up and down the Kenyan coast, I think to myself. Then I ask:

“So, what has been the response from other businesses along the beach?”

“Not great,” He replies. “They’re interested in making money and not saving the environment. But if each hotel or restaurant had a litter collection unit, similar to this one you see at my place – perhaps one every 100 metres, or so - it could make an enormous difference.”

“Another thing,” he continues, “If the government was to introduce a 10% surcharge on plastic bottles, there would be no more bottles to be found on this, or any other beach in Kenya. Every single bottle would be collected and recycled.”

I began to think about the local to global connections. At the global end we have Greta Thunberg, the 16-year-old Swede who is driving national governments and the corporate sector to consider the environment as the major factor underpinning economic growth

and profits; while here in Kenya, Yul Wenger is dedicated to encouraging lawmakers and business to do much the same at the local level. Both, in their own ways, are striving to bring about a better and more sustainable world.

I also think about the predictions for our world in 2050 – in another 30 years – if nothing meaningful is done to combat the climate crisis and plastics pollution. Something akin to global disaster scientists are saying! Similarly, I thought about what Bamburi Beach might look like in another 30 years, if nothing is done. It could well be a sea of litter that meets the ocean, rather than sand ... and very few tourists, to witness such a spectacle!

Yul, like Greta, is a change-maker: Yul at the local level, Greta on the global stage. The world would do well to take heed of Greta's words, while Kenya can only benefit from following the example set down by Yul. Let's all re-think the way we live, so that we can change the world we live in ... for the better!



Image: Duncan Gregory

**Saving
the
beaches
of
Kenya
for
our
children**