

Tyred Out

By Tony Wu

Digital illustration © Christopher Hart

I recently came across a story that underscores the old saying: 'The road to hell is paved with good intentions.'

A few decades ago, in 1972 to be exact, some conscientious people got together to help the marine environment. Determined to do good, Dr Ray McAllister, professor of ocean engineering at Florida Atlantic University, spearheaded a project to build artificial reefs.

Securing support from volunteers and a number of large organisations - including the US Army Corp of Engineers and Goodyear Tyre & Rubber Company - Dr McAllister's project involved creating what was billed as the world's largest artificial reef at the time by placing thousands of tyres into the waters around Broward County, Florida.

Recycling unwanted used tyres + creating artificial reefs to help marine life = stroke of genius. Simple, right?

As a good corporate citizen, Goodyear donated equipment to process used tyres and loaned the project team the famous Goodyear blimp for publicity. To much fanfare, the company issued a press release stating that tyre-based artificial reefs would 'provide a haven for fish and other aquatic species'. Everyone involved viewed the project as a major eco-friendly coup, with statements highlighting the

unique suitability of used tyres for building reef communities.

Following this lead, coastal communities around the world, including many throughout Asia, dropped countless tyres into the ocean in the following decades, with the objective of fostering new reef communities while disposing of unsightly discarded tyres.

It's amazing what a difference a few years makes.

As it turns out, dumping used tyres into the sea wasn't such a good idea after all. A number of problems have come to light, some of them seemingly obvious, others perhaps not so apparent.

Tyres tend to float away. In doing so, they kill corals and other marine life. Tyres also tend to break apart, so tyre pieces end up polluting oceans and coastal areas near and far. Some researchers also believe that tyres leach toxins into the environment. And corals don't seem to have a high affinity for rubber, so there hasn't been a lot of coral growth on tyres that have actually stayed put.

Bottom line - as William Nuckols of Coastal America (an alliance of public and private entities dedicated to protecting coastlines) believes, tyres that have been placed in the ocean are 'a constantly killing coral-destruction machine'.

To his credit, these days Dr McAllister is spearheading the cleanup of the mess caused by the tyres in his original project, an effort that will require an estimated US\$3.4 million and over three years of work involving many people and organisations.

Meanwhile, communities all around the world, including many in our region, will need to face the daunting task and expense of cleaning up the legacy of this well-meant but misguided effort. As one observer noted, it's easy to dump things into the ocean, but it's not so easy to recover them.

If there's a silver lining to the story, it must be this - over the years, the effectiveness of our efforts to create artificial reef communities has improved significantly.

Reef ball projects, Biorock mineral accretion projects and other similar efforts seem to be working, with many resorts, divers and coastal communities throughout the Asia-Pacific region pitching in.

Making a mistake certainly shouldn't discourage us from continuing efforts to preserve the environment, but if anything, this story should serve as a reminder that sometimes, the only difference between wisdom and folly is little bit of time. ■

