



Culture  
Cul De Sac

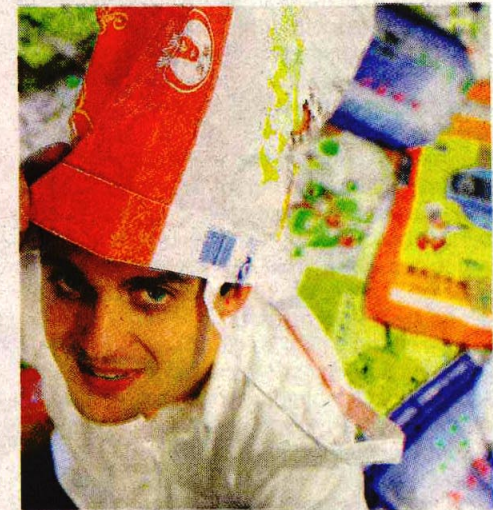
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# Going green, brown and blue

Last week, our *Stray Thoughts* columnist talked about global save-the-earth publicity stunts. Here, this columnist wonders why we can't seem to be bothered to do the everyday things that matter.



A man walks through bundles of bottles waiting to be recycled at a plant in London. Recycling is serious business in the city and its local councils believe supermarkets should be made to pay for the food packaging waste they create. – Reuters



All one needs is commitment to the green cause. Hong Kong entrepreneur Brian Pemberton refashions hardy rice bags into reusable and unique grocery bags, then sells them to eco-friendly shoppers to use instead of free plastic bags. – AFP

I was more than a little irritating, staying with my friend in London last year. She made me rinse out empty bottles, cans and jars before throwing them into the bin. Not only that, I had to separate the rubbish into three different bins: blue (dry recycling waste), brown (kitchen and garden waste) and green/grey (all other residual waste).

I was reminded repeatedly that if I did not comply with her Harrow council regulations, her rubbish would be left to fester in her front yard. Even then – although it took me more than a few days to get my head around where to dump plastic bags (green/grey) and paper bags (blue) – she still rifled through the rubbish first before filling up her wheelie bins.

Feeling this feisty fervency was indeed an education like none before. I learnt more in my conscientious effort to actively participate in saving the planet in that few weeks than I have by reading soporific features on going green or watching holier-than-thou documentaries on climate change.

Despite ground-breaking agreements being signed, conferences convened and revolutionary ideas propounded *ad nauseam*, the high-falutin messages somehow fail to translate well into our daily lives, where it really matters.

Similarly, Earth Hour has come and gone (I was out for a meal so technically my lights were switched off). While the bandwagon was brimming with green groupies, after more than two weeks, where are we now?

The point is that grand gestures are easy to embrace – cool, too, when they come with enough do-gooder publicity. But how many of us are even thinking about switching off our electricity for an hour every day or every week after that? Thought so.

Don't get me wrong. I do admire the green warriors of righteousness. Just as I applaud vegetarians who extol the virtues of their superior diet as they inexplicably slip into anorexia. And the advocates of Corporate Social Responsibility initiatives that culminate in a mortifying mock-cheque photo-op, illustrated with a bright star on their corporate profiles. And the charitable hearts who campaign to Save Gaza but stop short of acknowledging the cause of Sri Lanka's escalating atrocities.

Carbon footprint? Can we still remember how to measure it?

In the end, it is the 'little people' who care, who make it happen.

Early this year, I read of an eco-friendly UK family who have reduced their household

waste to 100g of litter a week. They do not buy anything with packaging, they recycle everything they can, they compost all their leftover food and buy vegetables direct from local farmers. It literally takes them six months to fill one bin.

Locally, singer Janet Lee carries her own Platypus drinking bag and her own cutlery to avoid using disposable plastics or woodens when she eats out. She also keeps her foldable shopping bag with her all the time, so that she does not have to haul her groceries home in our ubiquitous "beg plastik".

In a recent e-mail, she rallied those around her to sign up for Project Daily Million, for which she is a volunteer, to enlist one million people to make a daily pledge – to reduce, reuse or recycle one plastic bag per day.

This project arose from a planned performance, a willing sponsor and charitable causes. Yet, a year later, the number of pledges is minimal and, considering our increasing population, let's just say it won't be moving any landfill mountains soon. Why do we not care?

Says Lee, "We genuinely like nature and want to protect our homes for our children, but we all are volunteers with full-time jobs."

In reaching out to the general public, Lee admits that green causes like hers are generally targeted at those who can afford to go green and spend time thinking about it. "For those who are struggling to earn a living, it is unfortunately a non-issue."

Yes, with India and China vying for No. 1, and each country trying to raise its people's living standards, going green looks a lost

cause, overwhelmed by the sheer number of humans striving to have a house, car, kids...

Not necessarily, though. When I returned a month after my newly-acquired Harrow education, I did separate my trash on my first day back – quite enthusiastically, too.

Until I realised it was all going into the same communal bin and which is then cleared out into the same place where rubbish has been dumped over the decades. And despite the *gotong royong* that we participate in, our streets and parks are still liberally littered. More than a little irritating... maybe everyone should have a Harrow education?

■ People, places and perceptions inspire writer Jacqueline Pereira. In this column, she rummages through cultural differences and revels in discovering similarities.