(Towards) a Regional Assessment of Marine Litter in the East Asian Seas

WEBINAR SUMMARY

18 June 2024, 12-13 hours ICT

Background:

- Monitoring and assessment are indispensable in identifying marine litter status and trends and its impacts on the environment. The Coordinating Body on the Seas of East Asia (COBSEA) Regional Action Plan on Marine Litter (RAP MALI) recognizes the need to improve knowledge of the main types, sources and amounts of litter that enter the marine and coastal environment.
- The COBSEA Secretariat is working with the Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organisation (CSIRO), funded by the project SEA Circular, on a regional assessment on marine litter status and trends in the East Asian Seas.
- Marine Litter is a transboundary problem that impacts people and marine and coastal ecosystems. The East Asian Seas Region has been identified as a global region with disproportionately high litter leakage from land-based sources to the environment; however, these estimations often are generated by statistical models based that lack empirical 'on-the-ground' data about waste leakage to the environment, including different habitats and land-uses.
- This assessment builds on national monitoring and harmonisation efforts by providing a reliable snapshot of mismanaged plastic of plastic in selected areas in Cambodia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Thailand and Viet Nam.
- The assessment is a world first, including a statistically robust, global baseline study of how much waste is lost to the environment, including data from Cambodia, Malaysia, Thailand, the Philippines, and Viet Nam.
- The regional assessment is the first of its kind providing harmonized on-the-ground evidence at the regional level.
- A total of 1501 transects were surveyed across the 5 countries. This constituted 540 transects at inland locations, 430 transects along riverbanks, 369 transects along coastlines, and 162 sea surface trawls conducted by boat. Debris density varied among countries, with Thailand having the highest average debris density across inland, river, and coasts (4.11 items per m2), followed by Cambodia (4.06 items per m2), Viet Nam (3.54 items per m2), Philippines (2.35 items per m2), and Malaysia (1.29 items per m2). Debris density patterns varied among compartments examined but was highest at coastal sites across the region.
- The most common whole items encountered in the region were single-use items, such as food wrappers and labels, and plastic bottles. While the most common fragmented item found across the region was polystyrene foam.
- This assessment allows countries in the region to address sources, causes and drivers of pollution based on robust evidence, and include recommended actions to prevent, manage, and track pollution effectively.

Webinar summary and discussions:

- The webinar included opening remarks by Mahesh Pradhan, the COBSEA Coordinator, and Kamala Ernest, the SEA Circular Project Coordinator. This was followed by a presentation by CSIRO on the draft regional assessment; including important information regarding the review of the assessment. The final review will be conducted by the COBSEA Working Group on Marine Litter (WGML) and relevant technical partners.

DRAFT

- Discussions highlighted a series of changes and suggestions to the draft version before the secretariat re-shared it with reviewers. This included updating and using standard maps and a change in the document title.
- Participants suggested including the wording “towards” in the title as it only included 5 of 9 COBSEA countries.
- Participants identified further needs for capacity building and expansion of marine litter surveys in other areas and habitats in the East Asian Seas Region.
- Participants also noted the need to ensure ownership of the assessment.

Way forward:

- **WGML to identify a non-focal agency expert** to independently review the assessment. This may be the same people identified to join the webinar.
- The **5 country reports and factsheets will be reshared at the end of July** for review before being published on the website after the WGML-6 and IGM-26.
- The assessment will be presented to the 6th Meeting of the WGML for finalisation and presentation to the 26th COBSEA Intergovernmental Meeting (IGM-26) in Siam Reap, Cambodia, on October 21-25, 2024.
- Future iterations of the regional assessment may be agreed in IGM-26; this may also include the People's Republic of China, Indonesia, the Republic of Korea, and Singapore.

Reviewer Timeline (adapted following delays):

