

Changing minds to clean our seas



A Nautilus member is heading up a campaign to cut the 'tsunami' of plastic waste in the world's oceans — and she tells **ANDREW LININGTON** how it begins with a 'no ifs and butts' approach to problem...



The beach clean-up in Cannes, France, organised by the GreenSeas Trust

It was onboard a ship in the middle of the Atlantic that Nautilus member Fazilette 'Bobby' Khan had her 'lightbulb' moment.

'It was a lovely day and the sea was like a sheet of glass,' she recalls. 'Then, all of a sudden, I saw this huge tractor tyre floating along. It got me wondering as to how on earth it got there.'

Serving on cruiseships, she also witnessed growing environmental problems in some of the most beautiful parts of the world. 'The Caribbean islands used to be pristine, but I wouldn't sit on a beach in Antigua or St Lucia now if you paid me,' Bobby says.

Such experiences set her on the way to launching a charity — the UK-based GreenSeas Trust — which aims to develop programmes to 'stop the tsunami of plastics and marine debris entering the sea'.

The charity was established in 2003 in memory of Bobby's mother, Haida Khan, who came from Tobago. And it was after a holiday on the island that Bobby decided that she needed to do something to tackle the marine

litter problem.

'I was on the beach and saw so many people leaving their rubbish there,' she says. 'I told my day what a beautiful place it is but how it was being ruined by everyone chucking their waste into the sea. At that time, I was working ashore and the next day I was made redundant — which was a big sign for me to make a move.'

'I didn't know much about the environment then,' Bobby admits, 'but I could see the problem and felt that something had to be done about it.'

She began by making sure that litter bins were placed on the beaches in Tobago. 'It was amazing — within 15 days of them going in you could really see the difference. Today, the island's motto is "clean, green and serene".'

The success of the scheme led to an invitation to carry out a similar project in Trinidad and it laid the principles for the charity's objectives. 'It's much better to deal with the problem at source — and to do that by eradicating the "can't be bothered" attitude through education and interaction,' Bobby explains.

Since she launched the charity, Bobby has struggled to give sufficient time to it because of her work as an electro-technical officer. But now, she says, it is the right moment to devote more of her energy to the trust's ambitious projects.

GreenSeas Trust is targeting plastic waste in the sea — with evidence that as much as 12.7m tonnes of plastic enters the ocean every year. Once there, plastic material is broken down by the effects of sun, waves and oxidation into microplastics — tiny particles measuring between 1mm and 5mm.

On current trends, the ratio of plastics to fish in the ocean is set to rise from 1:5 at present to 1:1 by 2050. Studies have shown that toxins in microplastics ingested by marine life are passing through the food chain, threatening all sorts of adverse impacts on health.

'We really have to stop the stuff getting into the sea in the first place,' Bobby says. Her immediate targets are cigarette butts and plastic water bottles — something she has sought to persuade shipmates to support.

'People might think it is only a cigarette butt, but it is estimated that there are 13 trillion of them in the oceans. They are the number one item found in coastal clean-ups and in the sea they degrade, leaching out 200 toxic chemicals such as acetone, ammonia, formaldehyde and cadmium,' she points out.

Bobby says that while most seafarers respect the environment in which they work, she had to ask some shipmates not to throw their cigarette butts overboard. And she also tried to persuade them not to buy bottled water.

'You see plastic water bottles all over the place and there really

isn't a need to buy bottled water onboard, as the ship's systems produced very purified water,' Bobby notes. 'The problem, though, is that it is often highly chlorinated. However, I said to my shipmates that they don't need to spend a fortune on bottled water — they can just get a decent filter and a reusable bottle.'

In recent months, the charity has stepped up a gear with presentations to school children and a beach clean-up in France. Bobby and a group of volunteers worked with the mayor of Cannes to target the cigarette butt problem by distributing free pocket ashtrays and leaflets.

She's hoping to organise a similar event on the river Thames in the next few months. 'It would be great to get a couple of hundred people together to clean up along the waterline. Although I prefer to see the pollution being stopped at source, a clean-up can be a great way to raise awareness and make people think about the problems.'

Bobby admits that fund-raising

is a major challenge. 'I never have any money, but I do seem to be very good at persuading people to do a lot,' she adds. 'With social media it is much easier to spread the word and get people involved.'

After 30 years at sea, Bobby says she has developed a strong sense of the threats facing the marine environment. 'My career at sea has allowed me the privilege to visit some of the most exotic and pristine coastal areas in remote parts of the world,' she explains. 'It is heart-breaking to come back a few years later and see those very same coves and beaches now strewn with unsightly plastic bottles and other non-biodegradable rubbish.'

She is determined to do what she can to protect the oceans for the future. 'People still have this perception that the sea is like a big drain with a plughole through which all the waste goes. But it isn't like that at all — and that's the mindset I am hoping we can change.'

To find out more or to donate, visit the website: www.greenseas.org



'I wouldn't sit on a beach in Antigua or St Lucia now if you paid me,' says Fazilette 'Bobby' Khan



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