Building Con Son Plastic Bags Reduction Model

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This case study has been developed as part of Urban Ocean, one of Resilient Cities Network’s multi-city programs, co-designed and delivered with our partners Ocean Conservancy and The Circulate Initiative. Urban Ocean supports cities in assessing their risks and vulnerabilities as well as gaps in their waste management systems that lead to plastic leakage into the environment and the ocean. It helps cities to identify actions, design better projects and innovative solutions, leverage partnerships, and finally connects cities and their projects to potential funding sources.

Urban Ocean is currently being implemented in six cities in Asia and Latin America and supported by five cities in Europe and Asia Pacific that help their peers to develop projects that allow them to address current and future challenges. The program has a strong emphasis on peer-to-peer learning and knowledge exchange.

The case study series aims to highlight good examples in resilient urban waste management from across the world, and were selected with the following guiding criteria in mind:

- The initiative addresses multiple shocks and stresses
- The initiative exhibits multiple qualities of resilience
- The initiative yields multiple benefits, as it contributes to the overall resilience of both the waste management system and the city as a whole

CASE STUDY TAGS
✓ PROSPEROUS COMMUNITIES
✓ PROTECTED NATURAL ENVIRONMENTS

cover photo: Robert Brands, flickr
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The Con Son isle is embracing its potential as the ecotourism destination of Can Tho while addressing a major challenge that often goes hand in hand with tourism: increased waste production. In order to reduce plastic consumption and help maintain the growing ecotourism, the island implemented a multi-stakeholder program to reintroduce natural products as packaging materials. The coalition-building process with related businesses such as travel companies was a core element of the program, who sponsored the initial program funding.

**Shocks and stresses**

- **ENVIRONMENTAL DEGRADATION**
  Leakage to water bodies
- **INADEQUATE WASTE MANAGEMENT SERVICE**
  Challenge on access for waste collecting due to remote location and limited resources

**Qualities of resilience**

- **REFLECTIVE**
- **INCLUSIVE**
Mekong delta

photo by @placesofourlives
Home to nearly 200 inhabitants, Con Son is a 70-hectare island in the middle of the Hau River. It is commonly known as the “isle,” in the Binh Thuy District of Can Tho City. Due to the island’s fertile, alluvial soil, its residents are primarily engaged in agricultural production with a focus on fruits and fisheries. In recent years, the island has gained more recognition for its natural beauty and is becoming an increasingly popular destination for eco-tourism.

According to a 2018 survey, the emerging tourism sector contributed to an increased use of single-use plastic bags for covering fruits, storing fresh food, and domestic waste. Con Son has no formalized waste collection service. Residents bring their waste to the mainland by themselves, where the environmental company collects it under a contract with the Can Tho’s District People’s Committee.

The disposal of plastic bags pollutes Con Son’s environment – the very reason that made Con Son attractive as a tourism destination in the first place. To maintain the tourism economy without compromising the local environment, it was crucial to raise awareness of single-use plastics and find environmentally friendly alternatives.
In 2018, Mrs. Le Thi Be Bay, concerned about the development of ecotourism in Con Son, set up an initiative to raise local awareness on the risks of single-use plastics and to reintroduce natural products such as turf- and bamboo baskets as appropriate alternatives. In the past, people in Can Tho and across Vietnam utilized these traditional and more environmentally friendly products for packaging and storage. As plastic products became available and were perceived as more convenient, the use of locally sourced products declined.

The project called the “Building Con Son Plastic Bags Reduction Model,” started with a Con Son plastic situation study to analyze plastics use and behaviour on using plastics in Con Son followed by training citizens on local natural products. The training involved 22 households that are working on tourism business.

The project was financed by ODA Project Management Unit of Can Tho City, which contributed 240 million VND (10,000 USD). In addition to capacity building and raising awareness, the funding was used to incentivize residents with some environment friendly products to experiment. The project also included partnership building components with agencies and private sectors, particularly related to the tourism industry. It brought together different organizations to support and sponsor the project implementation, such as Vietravel. These sponsors further incentivize citizens with tools to help transition into natural products.
Workshop on Reintroducing Natural Products for Packaging

Source: Mrs. Le Thi Be Bay

Source: Building Con Son - People Limit the Use of Plastic Bags Executive Summary Report (ODA Can Tho, 2018)
Following the project, community perception and habits have changed around the use of plastic bags. The initiative included a pre-program and post-program survey, which found the island wide use of plastic for storage reduced significantly for various purposes. Tourists’ use of plastics also decreased.

Furthermore, the introduction of turf baskets and bamboo baskets as alternatives to plastic bags also revived the Con Son basket and hammock knitting businesses. From a partnership perspective, the collaborative process that took place has raised the profile of Con Son. As evidenced by sponsorships and the implementation of these initiatives, the project brought together several stakeholders and visitors who were keen to preserve Con Son’s value and strengthen their resilience.

Naturally, the project implementation was not without its challenges. While successfully helping reduce domestic waste, single-use plastic remains to be seen as the most convenient method of packaging. More time, deep
investment in alternatives, and comprehensive education is required to create substantial behavioural change which ensures lasting environmental sustainability.

Regardless, from this program residents have benefited from an improved local environment, increased domestic and foreign visitors bolstering the tourism sector, and new job opportunities. The people in Con Son are maintaining the movement Con Son Plastic Bags Reduction voluntarily and its new brand as “Con Son – Environmentally Friendly Place.”

Con Son’s success has helped raise awareness and reduce the use of plastic bags for people in the broader Binh Thuy district and Can Tho City. The government communication agency as well as other entities such as tourist agency and local NGOs also use the project as an example on how a campaign can create behaviour change to protect the environment and reducing plastic waste.

Currently, people in Con Son have continued the initiative beyond the initial financial support from the program. Can Tho City hasn’t replicated this model in other areas yet but uses it as a best practice to learn from in trainings and workshops with other communities.

source: Building Con Son - People Limit the Use of Plastic Bags Executive Summary Report (ODA Can Tho, 2018)