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Wastewater, what?

By Abigail L. Ho-Torres – November 23, 2020

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BEFORE I joined my current company, I had no idea what wastewater was. Apparently, I was not alone. According to a Maynilad-commissioned qualitative study in 2018, the public's knowledge about wastewater—what it was, where it came from, where it all went—was little to none.

This poses a problem. How so? If people do not even know what happens to water after they use it, how can we expect them to even care where used water—or wastewater—goes afterwards? And it's important that we care.

Of the water that we use each day, around 80 percent ends up as wastewater. Of this volume, 80 percent goes back to our water bodies without undergoing adequate treatment, according to data from the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP).

A portion of the toilet that gave FEU a big win in the 2019 Golden Kubeta Awards. FEU Media Center

Because water is a finite resource, it just makes sense that the water we use goes back to nature so we'll have water to use again—and so the cycle goes on and on and on. But when used water returns to water bodies untreated, with all of the icky, potentially harmful stuff still in it, I don't think any of us would want to use that, let alone drink it.

The Boracay experience

Let's go back, for a moment, to that day in February 2018 when President Rodrigo Duterte called the world-famous Boracay Island “a cesspool.” At that time, that was a fairly accurate description, unfortunately. One of the major reasons Boracay reached that state: the discharge of untreated wastewater into the sea. And that practice has been going on for years.

Two months after that “cesspool” comment, President Duterte ordered the six-month closure of the tourist paradise, and even declared a state of calamity there. Massive clean-up efforts were undertaken. To prevent the same thing from happening again, more stringent requirements, mostly in terms of solid waste management and wastewater treatment, were put in place. One of the requirements for establishments to be able to reopen was connection to the existing sewerage network or operation of their own wastewater treatment facility.

A kubeta fit for royalty gave Petron E. Rodriguez branch the honor of being the inaugural winner of the Golden Kubeta Awards. Petron

The closure of Boracay from May to October resulted in significant economic losses. A study by the Philippine Institute for Development Studies (PIDS) titled “The Boracay Closure: Socioeconomic Consequences and Resilience Management” placed aggregate economic loss in total output—or the value of all goods and services produced in an economy—at between P20.8 billion and P83.15 billion. Compensation losses, with businesses closing down, ranged from P7 billion to P27.9 billion.

“Overall, while the results may not be very significant at the national level, it will still have its direct and indirect effects to people living in the island and in the entire municipality of Malay,” the PIDS report said.

Beyond Boracay

TEN years before the Boracay closure took place, the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) placed the country's annual economic losses due to poor sanitation or improper wastewater management practices at P77.8 billion, as stated in its report titled "Economic Impacts of Sanitation in the Philippines."

The negative effects of poor sanitation go beyond the economic. Untreated wastewater can cause diseases such as diarrhea, hepatitis A, and leptospirosis. Like in the Boracay example, poor sanitation practices also have far-reaching effects on the environment, including fish kills and contamination of groundwater, or water found underground.

After its Antipolo branch won the top award in 2018, Xentro Mall Polangui wins in the Malls and Restaurants category of the 2019 awards. Xentro Malls

According to a 2009 study of the Asian Development Bank, 58 percent of the country's groundwater was contaminated by infectious wastes coming from unsanitary septic tanks (or *poso negro* in the vernacular), wastewater discharge from industries, and runoffs from agricultural fields and dumpsites.

Closer to our own homes, improper wastewater management practices—like not having a septic tank, not conducting regular desludging of septic tanks (should be every five to seven years), pouring oil down the drain, flushing solids in the toilet, and not being connected to sewerage lines (for those located in sewered areas)—can result in various headaches, including sewage backup (imagine poop coming out of your shower drain—yes, it can happen) as a result of clogged sewer lines.

Efforts to raise awareness

Given the importance of proper wastewater management, numerous campaigns have been put in place, and continue to run, to underscore the need for proper sanitation. Goal 6 of the UNDP's Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) has to do with access to clean water and sanitation for all by 2030.

One of the global goals under Goal 6 is the improvement of water quality "by reducing pollution, eliminating dumping, and minimizing release of hazardous chemicals and materials, halving the proportion of untreated wastewater, and substantially increasing recycling and safe reuse globally."

Last Thursday, November 19, we celebrated World Toilet Day. Yes, it is a thing, and it's spearheaded by various UN agencies and other international organizations. This year's theme, Sustainable Sanitation and Climate Change, is quite fitting, given that we recently just experienced strong typhoons that resulted in massive flooding in several areas in the country.

What do toilets have to do with climate change, you may ask. The World Toilet Day web site explains: "The effects of climate change threaten sanitation systems—from toilets to septic tanks to treatment plants. For instance, floodwater can damage toilets and spread human waste into water supplies, food crops, and people's homes. These incidents, which are becoming more frequent as climate change worsens, cause public health emergencies, and degrade the environment."

The web site further states: "4.2 billion people live without access to safely managed sanitation. Instead they often use unreliable, inadequate toilets or practice open defecation. Untreated human waste gets out into the environment and spreads deadly and chronic diseases. Sustainable sanitation systems, combined with the facilities and knowledge to practice good hygiene, are a strong defense against Covid-19 and future disease outbreaks."

Golden Kubeta Awards

SINCE 2016, Maynilad has been celebrating World Toilet Day with the Golden Kubeta Awards, an awareness and education campaign that seeks to bring the conversation about proper wastewater management to the mainstream. It also envisions clean and comfortable public restrooms in establishments, regardless of type and industry, all over the country. It is part of Maynilad's Kubeta PH

campaign, an integrated information, education, and communication campaign that aims to spur positive action from all stakeholders on wastewater management.

The Golden Kubeta Awards follow a rigorous three-step selection process that combines physical audits with social media nomination and voting. For the first round, nominations are crowdsourced via social media platforms, and posts have to use the hashtag #GoldenKubeta to qualify. Initial nominees are then asked to provide additional photos of their toilets to make their nomination official.

Those who are able to submit the required additional photos move on to the second round: the physical audit. A team visits each nominated establishment to do a surprise check of their toilets, as well as to conduct interviews with the people managing the establishments regarding their wastewater management practices.

Nominees who make the cut then move on to the final stage: public voting. Three finalists for each of the Awards categories—Schools and Universities, Terminals and Stations, Government Offices, and Malls and Restaurants—are subjected to online polling via Facebook, through the Kubeta PH Facebook community page. All reactions, excluding sad and angry, count as votes for each nominated establishment.

This year, Maynilad opted to forgo the usual awards program, given the pandemic. Instead, the company touched base with past winners to ask them about their continuing journey in keeping their toilets Golden Kubeta Awards-worthy.

Atty. Gianna Montinola, Senior Vice President for Corporate Affairs at Far Eastern University, shared: “At FEU, we take great pride in our services and in our facilities. We want to offer our community, especially our students, a clean, safe, and secure environment. We want the university to be a beautiful campus, but also one that functions efficiently. Proper maintenance is key. Furthermore, we want to inculcate the importance of respect for public space. It is everybody’s responsibility to do their share. We are grateful to all who support our initiatives.”

FEU was last year’s Golden Kubeta Awards winner in the Schools and Universities category, besting the University of the Philippines Diliman and Miriam College. It also bagged the People’s Choice Award with a whopping 10,000 votes.

Maynilad hopes that through the lowly *kubeta*, the public may come to know the importance of proper wastewater management, and lead them to care enough about the issue to do their part in ensuring our contribution to environmental preservation. I’m sure none of us would want to live in a cesspool.