

Living Zero Waste As Told By A Singaporean Eco-Warrior

By: Eryka Rojas

If you've ever stood in front of an Olympic sized swimming pool, you would know just how intimidating the depth would be to someone who isn't Joseph Schooling. That's an astonishing 2,500,000 litres worth of water.

Did you also know that just in 2019, the world produced over two billion tonnes of waste? That's 80,000 Olympic sized swimming pools!

With such shocking statistics, It's no longer a surprise that countries globally have resorted to investing on their very own sustainable efforts in the hopes of curbing a growing worldwide concern. Many more individuals have also taken it upon themselves to take responsibility for the planet's wellbeing. While some have chosen to bask in the glories of reusable metal cutleries, others have decided to take the path towards the extreme.

The zero-waste community in our humble red dot, though small, plays a crucial role in encouraging the wonders of a sustainable lifestyle to fellow Singaporeans. With a few trusty knick knacks on one hand and a purpose on the other, these environmental influencers have slowly become the local Instagram scene's eco-spos.

Singapore's Very Own Eco Warrior



(PHOTO: Sandra Zhang)

Sandra Zhang is an environmental advocate who shares oodles of insights and tips revolving around living sustainably and zero-waste. The 47-year-old eco warrior covers it all - from responsible consumption habits to bite-sized do-it-yourself projects.

Affectionately known as @monoandco amongst her loyal pool of followers, Sandra has been an avid recycler since her youth.

"The concept of zero-waste was new to me then. I only picked it up after watching the documentaries, *Trashed* and *Addicted to Plastic*, eight years ago," she said.

The documentaries opened Sandra's eyes to the reality of today's ever growing and toxic global waste issue.

A modern consumer's trash does not only consist of regular food waste. More often than not, electronic waste, textile waste, and single-use plastic discards end up in landfills alongside scraps of food. In Southeast Asia, while 70% of trash are processed into recycled plastic waste, at least 30% of food contaminated trash remain in landfills to be incinerated.

Sandra recalled scenes of children scavenging and sorting out recycled plastics for profit in hazardous landfills. She also referred to the drastic impact of today's consumption habits to the planet's biodiversity.

She questioned, "*Why should others suffer from the waste problem that I have personally created? Why should I leave my rubbish for someone else to take care of?*"

Moving Towards a Zero Waste Singapore

In 2019, Singapore recognised the need to move towards a sustainable economy. As such, the country's very first Zero Waste Master Plan was launched to minimise unnecessary waste production.



(PHOTO: Towardszerowaste.sg)

The master plan's overarching goal is to raise the overall recycling rate to 70% and the domestic recycling rate to 30% by the year 2030. A good percentage above the current rates of 61% and 21% respectively.

Sandra shared that she is often bombarded with questions regarding the inconvenience surrounding her zero waste lifestyle. Many a time, she carries along what she refers to as an ‘eco-survival kit’ consisting of nylon shopping bags, a lunchbox, reusable cutlery, and a water bottle - all in the name of reducing single-use plastic waste. She’s simply become so accustomed to it that it’s no longer an inconvenience.



A trusty metal lunchbox is one of the few necessities that Sandra brings along in her eco-survival kit (*PHOTO: Sandra Zhang*)

Her zero-waste efforts revolve around the principles of reducing, reusing, and repairing.

She listed sourcing for alternatives for everyday household necessities. Cotton rounds can be substituted by cotton flannels, tea seed powder can be used in place of dishwashing liquid, and citronella essential oil can substitute mosquito repellent.



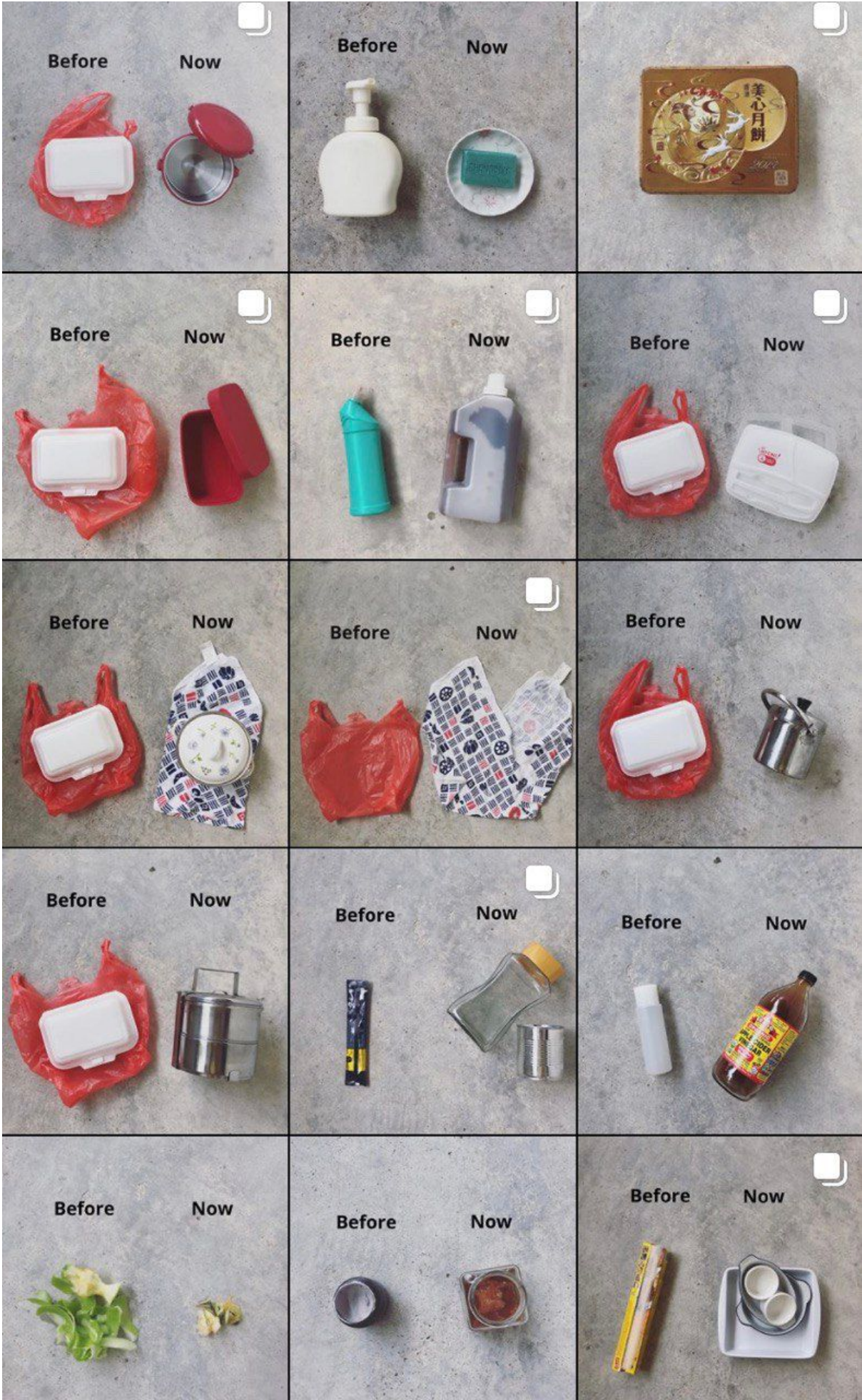
Sandra repurposes used plastic bottles as containers for her homemade all purpose cleaner - a cleaning agent made out of orange peels and white vinegar. *(PHOTO: Sandra Zhang)*

To avoid secondary plastic packaging, Sandra has turned to shopping at her trusty neighbourhood wet market. Bringing her own bags and reusable containers for dry goods such as nuts, herbs, and flour.



She takes her extensive collection of colourful eco-friendly bags with her to the market and uses them as sustainable alternatives to single-use plastic bags. *(PHOTO: Sandra Zhang)*

“I don’t keep tabs on the amount of waste that I produce. I keep a blog to document my personal journey instead. A zero-waste lifestyle is not all about limitation. But rather, moderation,” said Sandra.



(PHOTO: Instagram @monoandco)

Playing Your Part

Singapore generated a total of 949,300 tonnes of plastic waste in 2018 alone. The Straits Times reported that only 4% of this was recycled.



(PHOTO: Sandra Zhang)

One thing is for certain and that is that we have a long way to go towards attaining our vision of a zero-waste nation. Without a doubt, it poses as a great challenge. But it's not entirely impossible if we diligently play our individual parts.

According to Sandra, it's as simple as opting for reusable alternatives and avoiding the use of single-use plastics. On her blog, Mono And Co, she details nifty tips and tricks and informative guides for readers like you and I.

Despite the massive influx of affirmation and encouragement, the environmental activist humbly shared that she is only happy that her platforms are inspiring a growing community of changemakers.

In the words of the Sandra: "To those who have embarked on their zero-waste journeys, we are making a great collective effort, going by how environmental issues have been making headlines. And for those who are still undecided, start with one simple eco habit. Be it a reusable bottle or shopping bag: one single-use plastic waste avoided is one less waste left on the earth."

The 49-year-old advocate is a testimony to the fact that despite the difficulties and challenges, Singaporeans can live with a waste-free lifestyle in this day and age.

According to the United Nations' Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, the earth has until 2030 to deal with the rising threats of climate change. Though some scientists believe that it will no longer take as long before our planet becomes inhabitable.

So what are you waiting for? All it takes is for you to start making a difference.