

Iconic beach: From trashed to treasured

Running along the row of warung, which have appeared on the steep ground above the beach over the years, is a narrow gorge that opens out to the beach cave. In the rainy season trash and human feces would wash into the gorge, where it was trapped, collecting into great piles of putrid waste, before the tide washed it out to sea.

The biologist and surfer was shocked by what he saw and by reports of people developing skin rashes and strange illnesses after coming into contact with the disgusting water. He says there were many people and organizations trying to address the problem, such as the Gus Foundation and Ibu Wayan Suryani, who had been collecting trash and disposing of it for many years. Lowe also stepped in to help and in the process Project Clean Uluwatu was founded.

“When we started the cleanup, there was 30 tons of trash behind the first ever septic toilets built by the Gus Foundation,” says Lowe of the scale of the problem facing the community. Nearby, the original septic tank and water garden is being rebuilt for better efficiency and trash is now separated into organic and inorganic waste to be hauled up the cliff to huge Project Clean Uluwatu community bins and collected by Eco Bali Recycling.

“Uluwatu is a surfing Mecca and yes the waves are awesome, but by my third day here I noticed the smell. This waves are part of surfing history. The swell is cherished, but few were willing to do anything about the rubbish,” says Lowe, standing in the cave that opens out to — the now clean — Suluban Beach. He had arrived in Bali for a short holiday, but two years on and he is still here — working with groups to find solutions to protect the beach.

“There have been a lot of great people involved in the cleanup, such as Tim Rosso and Ollie Crowell. They were some of the first people to help raise funds for the project,” says Lowe, stopping every few moments on the steep stairs and later cliff down to the beach to speak with locals, all who appear to have adopted the Florida surfer into the community. And it is these people that Lowe believes need to be the backbone of maintaining Project Clean Uluwatu.

“With the community we want to create a sense of pride so people don’t just go to work here [at kiosks and warung], but enjoy their beach, one of the world’s most amazing,” says Lowe. However, changing local mind-sets on waste has been an uphill battle, with some locals deeply suspicious of the whole affair.

“When we did water testing, some locals were very disturbed. I tried to explain it was just to understand the extent of the problem we were facing,” says Lowe. He adds at times it has been a mental stretch to understand a seeming lack of concern by the local community over trash and environmental damage. “There was one guy who asked why we were doing this clean up. He said ‘it’s only plastic. It’s brightly colored and looks nice’. I was so staggered by this comment that it took me a few minutes to grasp this and to point out the many problems with plastic and waste,” “When we first started this cleanup, I planned to stay for two months. I was naive. It took two months just to get one meeting organized,” says Lowe of the difficulties he faced to convince the local community that cleaning up their local environment was of benefit to all.

The tenacity to clean up Uluwatu’s Suluban Beach paid off for that local community, with many people from around the world drawn to this beach of mystery. Today most community members are supportive of the program and some, like Ibu Wayan Suryani are highly active and invaluable participants. The next phase of the beautification is to mass plant water gardens down the steep steps leading to the beach, using water recycled from the septic tanks. Shady trees have already been planted and a former warung is to be renovated into an information office.

“The office will be a place where volunteers can assist the project and also where information on environmental rehabilitation like this can be shared. “Hopefully people from other areas can take this information back to their own communities and replicate the cleanup project there as well,” says Lowe who, when he leaves the island, leaves one beach in a better state than he found it.