

Time to stop trashing the place

Published: 11 May 2014
Newspaper Section: Spectrum

Unfortunately, the anti-littering ethos has not yet taken hold in Thailand. Municipal workers with their oversized bamboo brooms work hard to overcome the barrage of junk being constantly and carelessly tossed on the ground by pedestrians. A long-tail boat ride to a beautiful beach in Phang Nga may lead to disappointment when that beach is strewn with washed up wrappers and plastic bottles.



There ought to be a law against that right? Well there is.

Nationally, numerous laws have anti-littering components such as the Public Cleanliness and Orderliness Act, the Act of Maintenance of Waterworks, the National Park Act, and the Highway Act. Each prohibits any person from discharging or leaving waste in public spaces. Section 20(1) of the Public Health Act states that for the purpose of maintaining cleanliness and orderliness the local government has the power to forbid the discharge, emptying, leaving, or causing to exist in a public place or way of sewage or solid waste, except in the place provided by the local government for such purpose.

In Bangkok, the designated authority in charge of keeping our streets litter free is the Bangkok Metropolitan Administration (BMA). The penalty for discarding your trash in a non-designated area within the public space is a fine not exceeding 2,000 baht, or 10,000 baht for roadways and waterways. The authorities will exercise discretion when assessing the severity of the offense based on the type of trash illegally discarded, the amount, and the location in which the offense occurred.

The BMA has on occasion dispatched their infamous “litter police” known in Thai as ‘Thatsakij.’ These are inspectors that resemble the Bangkok Metropolitan Police in every discernable way, from uniform design to colors to badges; except that they are not allowed to carry firearms.

The Thatsakij, can be found in popular tourist areas such as along Sukhumvit road, and are on the lookout for anyone throwing a piece of trash on the ground. Given their appearance, they are commonly mistaken for actual police by their prey. Transgressors cannot be arrested, but can be levied a fine that must be paid on the spot (for which a receipt must be issued), or required to clean up their litter. Upon finishing a nerve-calming smoke prior to exams at Thammasat, a lawyer I know flicked the butt onto the sidewalk; almost immediately he found himself wearing a bright orange vest, cleaning up his own litter (and more) in front of the university as other test takers filed past.

Despite the prevalence of the unofficial 'litter police' and the potential for a relatively high fine, the anti-littering laws haven't yet had the full desired impact. Informal trash piles are commonly seen beneath underpasses, and errant trash bags abound. Perhaps stronger sanctions would help. Thailand pales in comparison to Singapore when it comes to the enforcement and severity of anti-littering laws.

In Singapore, a first offense for littering will cost you \$S300, or approximately 7,000 baht. If someone is caught littering a second time, the fine rises to a whopping \$S500 or about 12,000 baht and the offender must appear in court.

Most often these "serial litterers" will be issued a Corrective Work Order (CWO), which is a mandate for community service that involves the offender cleaning beaches or other public spaces while wearing a brightly-colored jacket with insignia designed to bring shame to the litterbug. Discarding an unused receipt or cigarette butt on the ground in Singapore could result in a very unfashionable and costly penalty.

North Americans of a certain age are familiar with an image that marked the start of their anti-littering awareness — a native American Indian paddles his birch-bark canoe on a litter strewn river beside pollution-belching factories, lands it on a the shore beside a highway and has a bag of rubbish thrown out a car window at his feet. His majestic visage turns to face the camera as a tear trickles slowly down from his right eye.

While financial penalties undoubtedly helped curb littering habits, law enforcement officials generally have more important work to do, and there just aren't enough of them to make a meaningful difference. In North America what made people stop and think before tossing the soda pop can or candy bar wrapper out the car window was the moral element of the Indian's message. It suddenly felt wrong to do so. Perhaps something similar would work here. What do you think?

Angus Mitchell (angus.mitchell@dfdl.com)
Matthew Christensen (matthew.c@dfdl.com)
Ponpun Krataykhwan (Ponpun@dfdl.com)



Source: <http://www.bangkokpost.com/opinion/opinion/409131/time-to-stop-trashing-the-place>