Design of a Plastic Waste Clean-up Array System for Bolgoda Lake

N Azmy[1#], PGRW Premaratne[2], WAAR Wanasekara[3] and MCP Dissanayake[4]

Department of Mechanical Engineering, Faculty of Engineering, General Sir John Kotelawala Defence University ,
Sri Lanka
[1] 34-eng-116@kdu.ac.lk

Abstract— The harmful effects of plastic in waterbodies are well established. Its effects extend to animals in higher trophic levels. This paper presents a reliable and cost-effective waste clean-up device capable of removing floating and partially buoyant waste from freshwater bodies. The device described is a passive clean up system, which consists of three main phases. Namely, catching, concentration and collection phase. The catching phase traps the waste and directs it towards a collection cage. The collection cage retains the captured waste, and a conveyor belt extracts it. Finally, the waste trapped is transferred to an exit tray which slides the waste into a bin on the riverbank. A prototype of the device was fabricated and tested in Weras Ganga. Majority of the waste extracted was plastic packaging. However, small quantities of organic substances were extracted as well.

Keywords— **Plastic pollution, Trash collector, conveyor belt, rivers**

I. INTRODUCTION

Plastic is a synthetic substance made from hydrocarbons which can be moulded into solid items of nearly all shapes and sizes (Azmy, 2002). It has become the biggest contributor to the degradation of water quality due to its buoyancy, resilience, and toxicant sorption properties (Ericksen *et al.*, 2014). The factors driving the amount of plastics entering rivers include, population growth, urbanization and industrialization patterns within catchment areas, rainfall rates and the presence of structural barriers such as weirs and dams (Ericksen *et al.*, 2014).

Natural degradation of plastic occurs due to photodegradation followed by thermo-oxidative degradation (Webb *et al.*, 2013). UV rays provide activation energy to initiate the introduction of oxygen atoms into the polymer. This allows the plastic to become porous and split into smaller fragments before the polymer chains achieve a sufficiently low molecular weight for microorganisms to metabolize them (Webb *et al.*, 2013). These microbes either transform carbon to carbon dioxide in the polymer chains or integrate it into biomolecules (Webb *et al.*, 2013). This process takes 50 or more years to completely degrade (Webb *et al.*, 2013).

The fragmentation of plastic results in a high surface to volume ratio and they continue to accumulate environmental contaminants such as Persistent Organic Pollutants (POPs). The adsorption of POPs onto plastic can be transferred into tissues and organs of animals through ingestion and magnified through the food web (Fig. 1). By bioaccumulation and bioconcentration, they impact higher trophic levels.
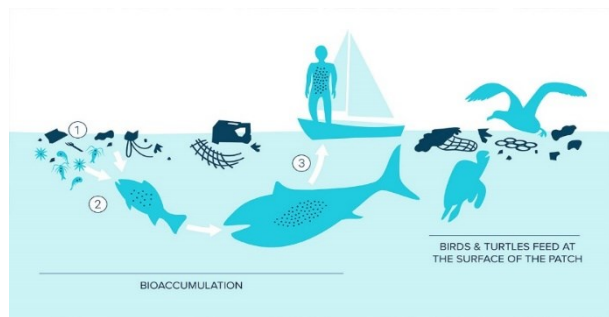

Figure 1. Impact of plastic debris

The global resin and fibre production has increased by 99% from 1950 to 2015, surpassing most other man made materials (Geyer, Jambeck and Law, 2017). 2015, the volume of plastic entering the ocean annually was 4.8 to 12.7 million metric tons. This approximately accounts for 1.7 to 4.6% of the total plastic waste produced (Jambeck *et al.*, 2015). In 2014 a study revealed that 5 trillion plastic pieces weighing over 250,000 tons were afloat the sea (Ericksen *et al.*, 2014). If the current consumption patterns continue the pieces of plastic in the ocean will surpass the number of fish by 2050 (United Nations Environment Programme, 2018).

A. Classification of plastic in the water column

As shown in Table 1 plastic can be classified into three main types based on size, they are macro plastics, meso plastics and micro plastics. The detection and removal methods for each type needs to be addressed separately as they differ in shape, size, material, composition, and abundance. The device described in this paper is designed to extract macro plastics from freshwater bodies. Thus, preventing it from entering the ocean.

Table 1. Size categories of marine plastic litter

Diameter	Source	Example
Micro (≤ 5mm)	Primary and secondary microplastics	Primary: industrial and domestic products; Secondary: textile, fibres, tyre dust
Meso (5 - 20 mm)	Fragmentation of larger plastic items	Bottle caps, fragments
Macro (> 20mm)	Lost items from maritime activities or from rivers	Plastic bags, food and other packaging, fishing floats, buoys, balloons

Source : Andrady, 2015

1) *Technologies addressing plastic pollution:* In Sri Lanka, waste in freshwater bodies is most often removed using excavators or by scooping it out manually. Some water ways contain Bamboo shafts across them to trap waste. In 2020, the ocean strainer, a boom made of polyurethane foam blocks covered in water resistant material was placed across the Dehiwala canal to act as a barrier and prevent plastic waste from entering the ocean (Hoole, 2019). This is like placing a bamboo shaft across the river. However, research suggests that foam blocks are more efficient at trapping waste and preventing it from overtopping than bamboo shafts (Ho, 2015).

Mr. Trash Wheel and the interceptor are river waste collection devices that are currently implemented. Mr. Trash Wheel is implemented in the Baltimore Harbour and The Interceptor has been implemented in Indonesia, Malaysia, and the Dominican Republic (Lindquist, 2017). Both systems use renewable power sources. Mr. Trash Wheel uses a water wheel as the main power source and solar panels as a backup power source (Lindquist, 2017). The interceptor solely runs on solar power.

The Interceptor uses a fixed barrier to divert waste towards the collection system while Mr Trash Wheel uses a flexible boom to divert waste to the collection system (Lindquist, 2017; *How it works - The Interceptor*, no date). However, they are both costly to implement (Goodwin *et al.*, no date).

The novel features of the device described in this paper are that it is much more economical, the waste collected is transferred to land hence less manpower is required, the device requires very little power as the conveyor belt does not run throughout the day and the size of plastic collected is only limited by the mesh size of the skirt.

This paper consists of three main chapters, the methodology which consists of design details of the system and the methods used to test the device. Following this are the results which contains key insights observed during testing. The next two chapter contain the advantages, limitations, and further improvements that can be done.

II. METHODOLOGY

The first step in the deigning process was selecting a suitable location. The system was designed based on the flowrate and dimensions of the selected waterway. Finally, a prototype of the device was fabricated and tested to ensure it works as required.

A. Site selection

Tides, wind, flow velocity, previous waste clean-up measures taken, and the rate of pollution were the factors considered.

Based on the rate of pollution the locations short listed were the Dehiwala Canal, Lunawa Canal and Weras Ganga (Fig. 2). After careful consideration of factors such as accessibility, ease of installation and previous clean-up measures taken Weras Ganga, a tributary of Bolgoda Lake was selected. A prototype of the device was tested at Meda Ela, which is a tributary of Weras Ganga (Fig. 2).

The reasons for selecting Meda Ela were because its easily accessible, the flood walls and bridge eases installation, has an average flow rate and floating plastic waste was observed.

The flow rate of Meda Ela was experimentally found by measuring the time taken for a floater to reach a known distance. The experiment was conducted multiple times and an average value of 0.44 ms-1 was obtained.

Figure 2. Locations considered and selected testing

B. Tides

The water level of Meda Ela was measured on two consecutive days to assess the rise and fall of it during high and low tides. The high tide and low tide times were obtained from tide tables (Fig. 3). The depth obtained was 1m. A significant variation was not observed during high and low tides.
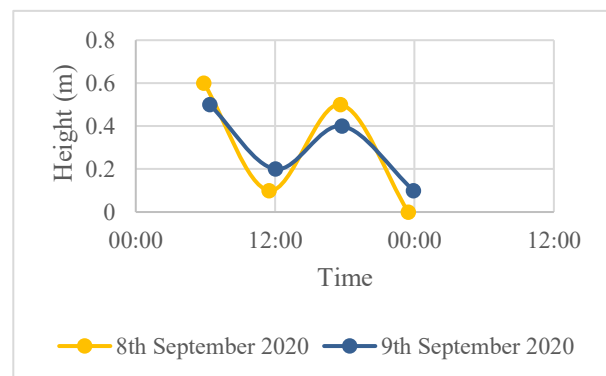

Figure 3. Tide tables for the 8th and 9th of September

C. Designing the device

This concept consists of a floating barrier (boom), where buoyant plastic particles can be caught, while neutrally buoyant aquatic animals can swim underneath (Fig. 4).
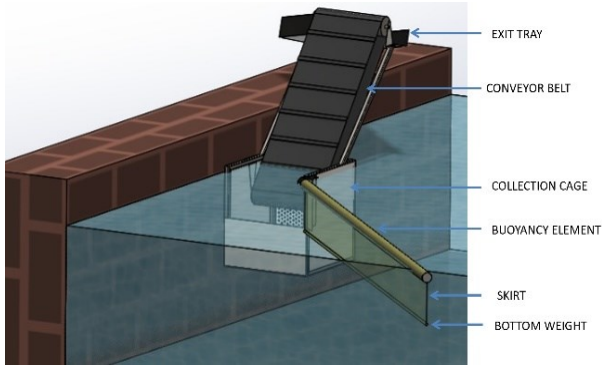

Figure 4. Initial draft of the device

The system removes plastic waste in three phases. Initially, waste is caught in front of the floating boom, the boom acts as a barrier and prevents waste from flowing downstream. Next, the accumulated particles slowly progress along the boom towards the collection cage and new particles are continuously added to this stream. Finally, the stream of waste enters the collection cage and forms a point of high concentration, from which waste is extracted using a conveyor belt. The waste extracted is transferred to an exit tray which slides it into a bin located on the riverbank. The relevant local authorities can empty the bin as an when required.

The Catching Phase: The boom consists of three main parts they are a buoyancy element, skirt, and a bottom weight (Fig. 4). The design requirements of the boom are buoyancy, the ability to transport plastic, bending stiffness, skirt orientation and axial stiffness.

Figure 5. Boom used in the prototype

The buoyancy element keeps the boom afloat while preventing trapped waste from overtopping. In addition, it compensates for the deadweight of the structure as well as the external forces acting on it. Moreover, it aids in guiding plastic towards the collection cage. For the prototype, a 3m PVC pipe with an outer diameter of 90 mm and wall thickness of 5 mm sealed at both ends was used as the floater (Fig. 5).

The buoyancy element was fixed to the collection cage using a specially designed hinge capable of moving up, down, in and out (Fig. 6). The hinge was designed to be able to withstand the changes in water level and flow direction.

Figure 6. Boom Hinge

The skirt captures partially submerged debris and directs it towards the collection cage. It spans the entire length of the buoyancy element. For the prototype, a 2.54 x 2.54 mm diamond polyester mesh with a thickness of 0.78 mm and a width of 420 mm was used (Fig. 5). To maximize the skirts efficiency, a vertical orientation must be maintained (Sivasubramanian *et al.*, 2014). Hence, a bottom weight is needed. As per the calculations, the bottom weight required was 2 kg.

1) The Concentration Phase: The boom was placed at an angle with respect to the riverbank, with the opening against the flow. This angle allows the current to transport the debris towards the collection cage and form a high concentration area, from which debris can be easily removed. The maximum deployment angle of the boom at a speed of 0.5 ms-1 should be 45 degrees (Shahryar, 2017). This angle should decrease as the flow rate increases.

2) The Collection Phase: Plastic that gets accumulated in the collection cage is removed by a mesh conveyor belt. The conveyor belt system was designed to be able to remove 30 kg waste per day. The roller rpm and belt speed were found using equation 01.

$$M = \rho_{belt} \times K \times (0.9B - 0.05)^2 \times V_{belt} \qquad (1)$$

Purchasing a stainless-steel mesh conveyor with cleats for the prototype was not economically feasible. Therefore, a conveyor belt was fabricated. The materials used were lashing belts, a plastic mesh for the conveyor, and pieces of GI mesh for the cleats.

To minimize the energy requirement the belt was designed to run for one hour daily. The conveyor belt transferred the waste to an exit tray which slides the waste into a bin located on the riverbank (Fig. 4). A bin made of wire mesh was used remove any trapped water within the trash.

D. Material selection

The materials selected for the system and prototype are included in Table 2. The deviation of the materials was due economic considerations.

Table 2. Materials selected for the device and materials used for the prototype.

Component	Selected Materials	Materials used for the Prototype
Frame	Stainless Steel Box Bar	Mild Steel Box Bar
Shafts	Stainless Steel	Mild Steel
Bearing Support	Stainless Steel Plate	Mild Steel Plate
Floater	PVC pipe	PVC pipe
Conveyor	Stainless steel mesh conveyor	Lashing belts, Plastic Mesh, GI Mesh
Skirt	Wire Mesh	Plastic Mesh
Side Panels - Conveyor Belt	Aluminium Sheet	Alloy Coated Steel Sheets
Side panels - Collection Cage		
Exit Tray		
Power transfer mechanism	Gear Drive	Chain Drive

E. Testing

To ensure that the device functions as required a prototype of it was fabricated and tested for a period of three days. On day one the device was installed and observed for around 5 hours. The drawbacks were noted, the system was removed, modifications were made and re-installed the next day.

Three cases were observed during testing,

- The flow of waste along the boom
- The retention of waste in the collection cage
- The ability of the conveyor belt to extract the retained waste.

The results obtained for each of these cases are discussed in the following chapter.

III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

A. Types of waste collected

Majority of waste collected was plastic. Plastic packaging items such as PET bottles, beverage packets, cigarette packets were prevalent (Fig. 7). This shows that plastic packaging is one largest aquatic plastic polluters. Moreover, the device removed organic materials such as small aquatic-plants and wood as well.

Small aquatic plants did not affect the system. They flowed along the boom, got retained in the collection cage, and got extracted by the conveyor belt. In contrast, larger plants obstructed the boom and prevented waste from flowing towards the collection cage. Extraction of plastic entangled with these plants was not possible.

During testing, large aquatic plants were removed by manually increasing the angle of the boom. This was not an efficient way to manage the plants. It resulted in a certain amount of waste entrapped by the boom to escape along with the plants. Placing a barrier on the opposite end of the bridge to trap large plants without affecting the flow prevented this.

Figure 7. Waste collected by the prototype

B. Boom

1) Angle of the Boom: The flow of waste along the boom was monitored by adjusting the angle of the boom with respect to the collection cage. Initially, the angle of the boom was set at approximately 170 degrees. At this angle, some waste moved along the boom towards the collection cage, but some did not. Next, the angle of the boom was adjusted to approximately 150 degrees. Here, the amount of waste that moved along the boom increased.

The minimum deployment angle of the boom during testing was only 60 degrees. Which was less than the recommended angle. However, decreasing the angle further would have increased the space between the retention wall and the end of the boom. Which would have caused waste to escape from that gap.

2) Skirt Material: The entanglement of waste to the skirt material and the formation of a barrier decreased the amount of waste that reached the collection cage. In Fig. 8, waste inside the yellow rectangle was stuck due to the piece of wood not moving into the collection cage. Waste is encircled in red to show two different time stamps.
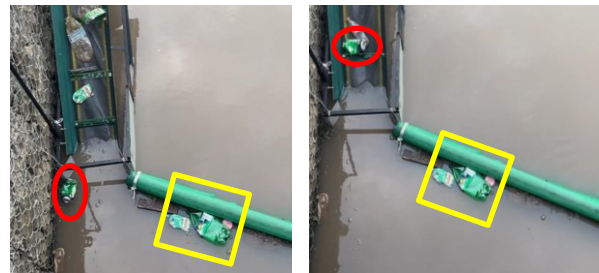

Figure 8. Waste Getting Stuck on the Boom

There were no environmental impacts of using a mesh as the skirt material. When the skirt was removed there were no fish, aquatic plants, or other animals caught on it. However, the testing period was short, therefore the long-term impacts of using a mesh are unknown.

3) The orientation of the skirt: The skirt retaining its vertical orientation was one of the main requirements of the system. Initially, due to the bottom weight being insufficient (0.6 kg) the skirt did not retain its position. As a solution to this, the bottom weight was increased by removing the end caps of the GI pipe that was used as the bottom weight (1.03 kg). This solution worked to a certain extent but did not retain its vertical orientation. However, as per calculations, the bottom weight must be 2 kg for the skirt to retain its vertical position.

C. Environmental conditions

The effects on the system due to tides and an increase in flow velocity were observed.

During testing, the flow velocity did not significantly increase therefore overtopping of waste was not observed. Also, large fluctuations in the water level during high and low tides were not observed.

Environmental conditions during testing were relatively constant. Therefore, the durability of the device in extreme weather conditions is unknown.

D. Collection Mechanism

1) Effectiveness of the Collection Cage in Retaining Waste: As shown in Fig. 9, the collection cage was able to effectively retain waste. However, the capacity of waste it was capable of retaining was limited to its size. Since the prototype was a scaled-down (1:0.8) version of the device the amount of waste that the collection cage is capable of retaining is much higher.

Figure 9. Waste Entrapped in the Collection Cage

2) Efficiency of the Conveyor Belt: The conveyor belt was able to extract all waste retained by the collection cage including large PET bottles. However, during the initial testing period, flat waste particles got trapped between the cleats and the belt. This waste got dislodged at locations where it was not been collected. Therefore, entered back into the water.

Fig. 10 shows the plastic bottle which is circled in red getting trapped between the conveyor belt and a cleat. It results in the overthrowing of the beverage packet shown inside the yellow rectangle. The trapped bottle got dislodged when it was under the conveyor and entered back into the water stream. This trapped bottle destabilized the bucket

used to collect waste and caused some of the waste to enter back into the water stream (the waste in the yellow rectangle). This was caused by the cleats being fastened at the two ends only. As a solution to this, the cleats were fastened to the conveyor from the centre as well. This prevented waste from sliding between the cleats and conveyor.
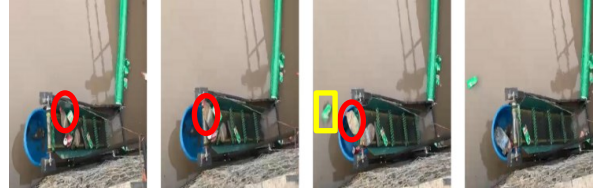

Figure 10. Waste Getting Trapped Between the Conveyor Belt and a Cleat

The length of the conveyor belt did not reach the top of the retention wall therefore, as the design description states an exit tray that transfers the waste into a bin on the riverbank could not be fixed. As a solution, an easily removable bucket with holes drilled into it was attached to the end of the conveyor to extract waste falling from it. However, this limited the amount of waste that could be removed by the conveyor belt in a single cycle. The bucket had to be removed, emptied, and replaced a few times during extraction.

Due to the complexity in obtaining grid electricity as the device requires, a vehicle battery was used to power the motor. The motor used for the prototype was a 12 V brushed DC motor. Drawbacks of the motor were, when the tension of the belt increased the motor overheated, and the load-carrying capacity of the belt was limited by the power of the motor. However, large quantities of waste were not extracted by the conveyor belt at once, so the motor did not fail during testing.

E. Financial feasibility of the system

The cost incurred to design, fabricate, and implement the prototype was Rs. 30,108. Despite the low cost of fabrication and testing of the prototype the actual cost of the final device would roughly be around Rs.72,000 ($ 373.35). This is due to the use of materials that would increase the durability of the device.

The bar chart in Fig 11 compares the cost to implement this device when compared to devices such as The Interceptor and Inner Harbour Water Wheel. However, these devices have been tested and optimized for many years. Therefore, the cost is justifiable.

The cost was converted to USD using the exchange rate given on the central bank ($ 1= Rs. 192.85) website. As shown in the figure the cost of implementation of this device is 99% less than the other devices.
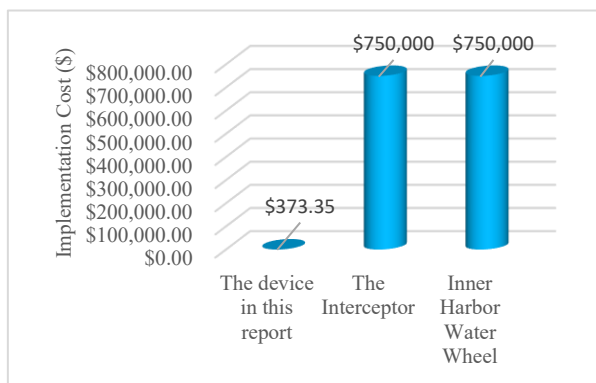

Figure 11. Cost comparison of existing devices with the device introduced in the paper

Further testing is needed to establish the total amount of waste that can be extracted by the system, the maximum load that can be carried by the plastic mesh conveyor belt used in the prototype, the durability of the device in extreme weather conditions, the movement of partially submerged waste along the collection cage, the effects of biofouling on the system. The system must be tested for a long period to get reliable results.

IV. CONCLUSION

Manually removing waste from rivers is a tedious process. The device introduced in this paper can trap and extract debris efficiently with little to no human involvement.

The novel features of this device in comparison to other implemented devices are as follows. The waste collection system is adjacent to the riverbank. Therefore, overhauling it for repairs and maintenance is straightforward. Moreover, collecting the extracted waste is a simple process of emptying a bin.

Systems like Inner Harbour Water Wheel and The Interceptor are advanced commercially available products. They can remove large quantities of waste efficiently. However, they are expensive to implement in a developing country like Sri Lanka. In comparison, the cost of fabrication and implementation of this device is much lower.

To optimize the amount of waste collected. Implementing this device in locations with low backflow of water increases its waste trapping efficiency.

The results clearly illustrate the device's capability to trap and extract waste in average weather conditions. However, its durability in extreme conditions is unknown. Testing the device for an extended period would validate the results.

To maximize its efficiency in wide rivers, two devices can be placed on either end of the riverbank with a clearance between them for vessels to navigate through. This would increase its capture efficiency. However, implementing two devices would increase the cost by two-fold.

The device can be modified to be more cost-effective and eco-friendlier. The improvements are as follows.

A. Further Improvements

•   Using a renewable power source such as solar power or hydropower (water wheel). The use of solar power is easier as Sri Lanka has strong sunlight throughout the day.

•   Fully automating the system by using a timer circuit.

•   Fixing a garbage level detection system to the collection bin to remotely monitor the waste collected.

•   Adding a tension adjusting system and an autocleaning system.

•   Exposure of the moving parts of the device could result in waste getting entangled to them.

•   To reduce the material cost of the device, recycled materials or anodic protection can be used.

V. ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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VII. AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY/ IES

N Azmy graduated from General Sir John Kotelawala Defence University in 2021, with a bachelor's degree in Mechanical Engineering. She is passionate about environmental conservation and believes that finding sustainable engineering solutions is the way forward. Currently, she works as a design engineer at Future Fibers which is a leading supplier of composite rigging to the marine industry.

P.G.R.W. Premaratne currently performs as the Facility Maintenance Engineer at Hayleys Advantis 3PL Plus. He recently completed his bachelor's degree in mechanical engineering at General Sir John Kotelawala Defence University and currently reading for his master's in project management at University of Bedfordshire. He has completed his internship at Piramal Glass Ceylon PLC as a trainee Mechanical Engineer.

WAAR Wanasekara graduated in mechanical engineering from General Sir John Kotelawala Defence University. Gained the first industrial exposure at Colombo dockyard plc. Currently working as an Assistant Engineer at Ceylon Steel Corporation. Involved in quality assurance of rolled and drawn steel products.

Cmde (E) MCP Dissanayake, CEng (India) is currently performing as the Head of Department (Marine Engineering) and hold 2 No's patents for his research papers published so far. He is an inventor and published 06 No's publications on Brackish Water Reverse Osmosis application, Fan Boat Building and Oscillation Water Column, Ocean Wave Eenrg Converter. He was the Director in Research & Development at Sri Lanka Navy and has received commendations in number of occasions from Commander of the Navy, HE the President of Sri Lanka for his innovation. Further, he was awarded with prestigious, Japanese, Sri Lanka Technical Award for his own developed low-cost Reverse Osmosis Plant, to eliminate chronic kidney disease from Sri Lanka. Moreover, he has a vast exposure on marine diesel engines and possesses a master's degree in Marine Engineering from Australian Maritime College, University of Tasmania, Australia.