

# Safeguarding Negombo's threatened ecosystems

Hemas Holdings PLC and its subsidiary Hemas Manufacturing (Pvt) Ltd signed Memorandas of Understanding (MoUs) with Clean Ocean Force Lanka (COF) to carry forward their commitment to protect Sri Lanka's natural environment through sustainable and responsible operations relating to the disposal of plastic waste.

The MoUs will allow the two parties to collaborate on a beach caretaker project in Poruthota Beach and a clean-up of Negombo Lagoon to combat plastic pollution in sensitive areas of the Negombo region for a more sustainable future.

These initiatives aim at maximising the recovery of Ocean Plastics, PET bottles, and other pollutants that wash into the Indian Ocean via the Maha Oya Lagoon as well as reduce irresponsible waste disposal by local fishing communities.

Acting Managing Director of Hemas Manufacturing Sabrina Esufally said, "Efforts such as these are a part of Hemas' environmental agenda that focuses on raising awareness, championing advocacy through partnerships, and formulating initiatives that safeguard our environment, protect our natural resources and the responsible consumption of plastic. Our partnership with Clean Ocean Force is one of several large-scale environmental projects planned by the Group to ensure the responsible disposal of plastic waste."

## Female workforce

It is estimated that 350 to 500kgs of PET bottles along with another 100kgs of other plastics, cans and pollutants, will be removed through the project. COF's female workforce, chosen from low-income communities in the area, will participate in the removal exercise.

These underprivileged communities are rewarded with incentives that will motivate them to perform such work towards protecting



beaches and waterways while uplifting their livelihoods.

Apart from this, recyclers pay for what has been collected which is then paid back to the communities in full. This income assures that these volunteers can expect a steady monthly income.

Group CEO of Hemas Holdings PLC, Kasturi Chellaraja Wilson, said, "As an island country in the Indian Ocean, Sri Lanka's marine ecosystems and beaches hold not just socio-economic importance but are crucial for healthy sustenance of life in Sri Lanka. We have recognised that their conservation is an urgent need of the hour. This is a timely initiative that places a spotlight once again on the need to urgently recycle plastic waste and restore our environment to its pristine glory."

Negombo is blessed with beautiful sandy beaches and the three waterways bordering the city making it a unique fisheries hub in the Western Province.

The first MoU signed between Hemas Holdings and COF seeks to engage in a beach caretaker project along the Poruthota beach. The other MoU with Hemas Consumer Brands' MoU, a clean-up of the Negombo lagoon, will also be set in motion.

## Biodiversity

The lagoon faces massive environmental challenges as it is connected by many canals and waterways that act as a pathway for plastic debris and pollutants. The addition of polythene, plastic, abrasives, and silt to the Negombo lagoon is destroying its biodiversity and en-

dangering the marine ecosystem because the lagoon connects to the Indian Ocean.

This unique daily and bi-weekly plastic removal and clean-up mechanism initiated by COF together with Governmental and other private sector stakeholders and its community volunteer force from the low-income families, target some of the most polluted beaches, canals and waterways in the Western province starting from Kammalthota in Negombo to Beruwala. Over hundred kilograms of plastics, polythene and other pollutants are removed daily and directed to their sorting centres before being sent for recycling.

Clean Ocean Forces Chairman and Founder Jerome Fernando said, "This partnership between Hemas and Clean Ocean Force for the lagoon operation is the first of its kind

where traditional catamarans are used to sail out daily and collect plastics and other pollutants which floats on the lagoon and are stuck in mangroves. This operation involves the fishing communities that COF works with which in return provides them with an income."

COF operates on a unique public-private partnership with the involvement of the Ministry of Local Government and Environment (WP), Waste Management Authority (WP), Marine Environment Protection Authority (MEPA), Environmental Division of the Police, Samurdhi Authority, SLLRDC, Education Ministry (WP), and the Municipal Councils and Local Government bodies of the Eastern Province. The whole operation is monitored through the Governor's office of the Western Province.