

*Story developed for Communications for Change (cChange)

EVERY time Captain Johnathan Smith comes ashore to the joys of family and friends, he experiences sadness and anger – all at the undersized crustaceans offered on sale at the market.

It breaks his heart when he finds the sellers, most of whom live below the poverty line, don't know they are causing the depletion of a family that play a role in the marine food chain and mangrove ecosystem they call home.

So he took a personal pledge to save as many babies and mothers from the pot– at his own expense – it was in the hope that others would be inspired to do the same.

Three years, some 40 bundles of crabs and hundreds of dollars later, that selfless act is beginning to prick the conscience of people he crosses on the street, the poor villagers selling undersized crabs and the social media commentators.

Slow it has been but a lesson is being learnt.

“On one of my travels to Tonga, I went to the market and saw a very small turtle for sale. I asked the vendor how much meat could I get from that turtle and he measured it out using a plastic bag which wasn't even a fistful. I bought the turtle and it looked like it was about to die. I sailed far out into the bay and set it free,” he recalled.

This marked the beginning of his newfound conservation drive.

“Whenever I go to the market and see undersized crabs or other undersized organisms that are still living, I buy and set them free. There's no point in getting angry on the vendors so I just inform them about the life cycle of the crabs. At least they know that they're selling something that hasn't even had a chance to reproduce.”

Captain Smith believes the key to changing mindsets hinges on the education of people and involving those who matter most in conservation-related workshops.

“I get so frustrated when I get invited to a workshop and all you can see are the experts or people who already know so much about conservation. The workshop facilitators should at least involve the people who don't know about marine conservation and the life cycles of marine life. They should at least offer to pay the travel expenses so that people living in coastal and rural areas can attend and be educated about these things,” he said.

“When I first started buying undersized marine life and setting them free, I used social media as a way to attract interest and hopefully a following from people who are well off and can afford to adopt the same habit. Sadly, all people have to say is ‘good job’ and that's it.”

In what could well be called a tradition of setting the young free, Captain Smith has found a way to pass on his teachings.

“I take my children, nephews and nieces out to the mangroves where we set the crabs free. I believe if we had posters around the place informing people about the life cycles of the marine resources they harvest, this could bring about some change.”

Captain Smith also voiced concerns about the red tape that hinder awareness efforts.

“We tried to put up posters once and the amount of red tape that was involved just put us off completely. It’s really important that organisations such as municipal councils are also informed and educated so that they’re aware of what we’re trying to do and that we have their support.”

In the face of the difficulties he encounters as an individual champion, Captain Smith is optimistic the tide of change will sweep over a population whose appetite for one of the mangrove’s delicacy has overwhelmingly upset the balance of life.