

Plastic dump investigation needs a whistleblower



Warrnambool film maker and environmental activist Colleen Hughson, meticulously collecting tiny plastic 'nurdles' that were illegally dumped through the Wannon Water system last November. Photo: Rosana Sialong.

By Carol Altmann

Every time I look at the above photo of Warrnambool woman Colleen Hughson, I am struck by the humility of it.

There is Colleen, at Shelly Beach, on her knees, deeply focussed, picking up tiny plastic beads – aka an environmental nightmare called “nurdles” – between her fingertips, one by one by one by one...the number appears to be endless.

That shaved spot you can see above her right ear was where she had surgery to remove a brain tumour not long before this photo was taken by fellow 'nurdler' Rosana Sialong*.

I am sure surviving a brain tumour must change you. It would make some of us, I suspect, become more selfish. In Colleen's case, however, it has made her generous spirit even more generous.

When Colleen, a film maker, discovered that tens of thousands of nurdles had been [illegally dumped](#) through the local Wannon Water sewerage system last November, she started a community action and clean-up group, [Good Will Nurdle Hunting](#), that is still going gangbusters today.

Colleen and Rosana and dozens of others have now been cleaning up this plastic pollution for months, including days of blazing heat and finger-freezing cold.

So far, they have picked up more than 650,000 nurdles from our local beaches and it ain't over yet. They just keep coming.

Wannon Water has also been cleaning up this mess for months.

It recently announced it had so far spent \$334,000 on collecting nurdles: imagine the cost if Good Will Nurdle Hunting was not helping out for free? It would probably be at least \$500,000.

What happened here was a major environmental crime.

A crime that is equivalent to someone stealing half a million bucks from a bank, except unfortunately crimes against the environment are not measured that way.

And yet nobody has been held responsible and nobody will because Wannon Water, despite its best efforts, has run out of leads.

I asked Wannon Water's general manager (service delivery) Ian Bail a bunch of questions about where the investigation was up

to and, in a nutshell, this is what he said:

- 20 sites have been visited. There are no more visits to come;
- the nurdles have been inspected by two independent labs and they still don't know what specific type of plastic it is or what it might be used for;
- investigator and retired police officer Mick Fennessy, who was hired by Wannon Water, has finished his immediate task;
- the multi-million dollar upgrade to the Warrnambool Sewage Treatment Plant will include a new system for accepting sludge which, hopefully, means this won't happen again.

Wannon Water is keeping the investigation open. It still hopes for a breakthrough, but that won't happen unless someone who knows what happened speaks up.

And somebody knows.

The person who poured the zillions of the nurdles into the system knows.

The person who delivered the sludge to Wannon Water's treatment plant containing all of these zillions of nurdles also knows, or *should* know.

Was somebody paid to look the other way?

Somebody knows.

And while we wait for somebody to grow a conscience, people like Colleen and Rosana and Keith and Brenda and Donna and Luke and Megan (the list of names goes on), will keep picking up the pieces.

*Rosana's photo provided the inspiration for this year's Warrnibald portrait prize winner, Megan Nicolson, who reproduced it in needlepoint.

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