



# MAKING SUSTAINABLE CHOICES

Together we can make a difference and take steps towards creating a sustainable Qatar', reads the *SustainableQatar* website. A simple message but one that is being carried forward earnestly, by a small community of committed individuals to promote environmental awareness within the professional community in Qatar.

Attend one of their sessions and the wealth of information collected can entice anyone to join this community. Heading this organisation is Katrin Scholz-Barth, President, SustainableQatar, who takes environmental matters to heart, and works hard to promote significant efforts to spread awareness.

She looks into the future and predicts, rather unsurprisingly, that the two impending threats, for not just Qatar but for the whole world, are water and energy. But sadly, she says, this urgency is not reflected in the actions of those living here.

"The average daily water usage in Qatar is 675 litres per person per day. In Europe, where people pay for water, the daily water usage is 150 litres per person per day. Water here in the desert is being wasted."

Scholz-Barth talks to *Qatar Today* about environmental issues and the awareness levels here. Also joining her is Mike Johnston, Middle School Associate Principal of American School of Doha (ASD) and one of the earliest members of SustainableQatar, who stresses on awareness and says that, the earlier it starts the better it is for all.

## It's not just water

Qatar might have a surplus of energy to desalinate water, but sadly the amount of water, fresh or saline is limited.

"Currently, all desalination plants discharge untreated brine back into the Arabian Gulf, increasing its salinity, which in turn, will have an impact not only on water quality and aquatic wildlife but also the economy. There is very little natural precipitation in the region that would sufficiently recharge ground water aquifers or surface streams that feed into the sea to dilute it," Scholz-Barth says.

The other vital concern is with regard to energy. In a country rich in gas and constantly increasing its gas output, the question is not how much we have but how much

By **Sindhu Nair**

*Small steps can indeed lead to bigger initiatives and SustainableQatar is a platform for such environmental initiatives.*



we can save.

“With simple measures like insulating buildings and roofs, a lot of energy can be saved. Again, energy efficiency requires technical understanding and implementation in an early conceptual design phase and commitment by all involved parties including the end user,” she says, adding, “Having said that, it is a delight that Qatar has started to invest in renewable energy like solar energy.” Johnston meanwhile feels the matter is not to be treated lightly, “The footprint we are leaving here in Qatar is one of the highest in the world. It is not natural that sedentary societies would live in a climate like Qatar. This means that we need to work even harder to reduce our impact.”

### Awareness key to survive

In a country that is taking baby steps in sustainable development, Scholz-Barth feels that the urge to change is prevalent, mainly in the leaders, and “the Qatar National Vision 2030 with its commitment to sustainable development is just one example that illustrates that Qatar is serious about taking actions.”

“Qatar’s commitment to eliminate flaring (the burning off of the remaining gas as it exits the exhaust stack is to be applauded. In combination with buying carbon and engaging every person in Qatar in local tree plantings to help offset carbon emissions are first big steps toward reduction of carbon emission.”

The time has come, she says, for authorities to take bolder initiatives in this area, “Environmental action and sustainable development require a lot more than recycling and carbon trading. Sustainable development requires a change in individual habits, behaviour and beliefs.”

But, she still feels that awareness has to be translated into responsible and concrete actions, and not only by the authorities. “Both Qataris and expats alike often lack an understanding that individual choices and actions do impact the environment. Environmental awareness starts with the understanding that we all live together on this planet and that it is our individual and combined challenge and responsibility to keep it liveable for many centuries to come. It is a process that starts with one’s

attitude and is guided by your head, heart and actions.”

Awareness should start early, Scholz-Barth feels, and seconding that thought is Johnston. “The time is crucial and our role in education is to bring about an awareness that leads to action. There is no time to waste as the shift towards sustainability will take more than a generation to play out.”

Johnston’s students at ASD have been participating in eco-friendly initiatives, “Two students created a presentation for the Sheraton Hotel. They showed various projects as to how the hotel could become more eco-friendly. What the cost would be, the benefit and long-term profits for these changes. Students at ASD have created a Reduce, Reuse, Recycle programme. They tackle many issues in class and through clubs. And I talk about this at our meetings giving everyone a fair idea on how small steps can lead to bigger initiatives.”

### Community led programmes

The SustainableQatar group came together to share interests, and to start dialogues on creating recycling programmes at schools. Environmental and social educators, who form the group, brainstorm about simple steps towards resource efficiency, according to Scholz-Barth.

But before the group can take far-reaching steps, its foremost goal is to increase membership thereby encouraging a larger community to: collaborate, share and help spread information.

“Our website (to be active soon) will be an important tool to spread information relevant to protecting and restoring Qatar’s environment. We are preparing environmental fact sheets that will aid those concerned about their personal environmental impact to make environmentally-sound decisions and choices in their daily lives. These fact-sheets will include a recycling guide and home energy saving tips such as how to protect residences against dust and energy loss most effectively, how to weatherise houses, tips for water conservation, where to find environmentally-friendly cleaning products and party supplies (biodegradable products), water sensitive gardening tips, a composting guide – just to name a few,”



**Katrin Scholz-Barth**  
President, SustainableQatar

Scholz-Barth says.

SustainableQatar plans on making all the monthly presentations available online as a membership benefit.

The global environmental scenario has made Scholz-Barth responsible and her actions, though small in magnitude, are still commendable.

“My engineering background and area of expertise in watershed protection has made me a conscious person when it comes to water use. I try to collect rain and grey water for irrigation, plant appropriate plants in my garden that need water only three times a week rather than every day. I weather-proofed my house mainly to reduce the dust in the house but with an extra benefit that less cool air escapes and my air conditioning operates more efficiently.”

She has also co-authored a book on green roofing systems, *Green Roof Systems: A Guide to the Planning, Design, and Construction of Landscapes over Structure*, co-authored with Susan K Weiler, was published in April 2009. As the title suggests, it is a technical resource that helps readers understand the ecological, aesthetic and economic benefits of green roofs from city scale to project scale. ■