

Kick the Plastic Habit

Choose Earth-Friendly Alternatives

by Avery Mack



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Grocery bags, bottles, cups and straws comprise much of the 9.1 billion tons of plastic manufactured worldwide in the past 65 years. Once discarded, 79 percent resides in landfills and litters the environment, with more created daily.

Annually, the equivalent of five grocery bags of trash for every foot of coastline worldwide enters the oceans, killing 100,000 marine animals. A 2016 World Economic Forum report says that by 2050, the world's seas could contain more plastic than fish.

At the 2017 Our Ocean Conference, the Ocean Conservancy and its partners announced a \$150 million preventive plan. "This is a major breakthrough for trash-free seas," says Susan Ruffo, the conservancy's managing director of international initiatives. "Our research found improved waste management in Southeast Asian countries [Indonesia, Philippines, Thailand, Vietnam and China] can halve plastic going in the ocean by 2025."

When the United Nations launched the Clean Seas campaign in 2017, Indonesia pledged \$1 billion to reduce plastic waste by 70 percent within eight years through education, taxes on plastic bags and investing

in alternative products. Increased awareness is crucial to buy and discard less, create alternatives and recycle more to support the planet's overall health.

Expanding Footprint

Lacking space, technology and equipment to transform waste into reusable materials, U.S. municipalities typically ship it to a sorter for processing elsewhere; often to China, where new regulations restrict what's accepted, leaving trash haulers scrambling. Although recyclable, these are the worst plastics:

#3, Polyvinyl chloride, used in plastic wrap, toys, squeeze bottles and packaging for peanut butter, contains lead and phthalate esters (chemical compounds) that affect development of testosterone, according to a study by the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development.

#6, Polystyrene, in Styrofoam, plastic utensils and disposable or carryout containers, is toxic to our brain and nervous system; ask what restaurants use.

#7, Polycarbonate, found in the lining of canned foods, sports drinks, juice

drinks, ketchup bottles and clear sippy cups, contains bisphenol A (BPA), a proven endocrine disruptor.

Small Changes Make a Difference

Recycling weakens plastic grocery bags, necessitating double-bagging to avoid spills. Average families annually accumulate about 1,500 plastic bags, with 99 percent ending in landfills, as litter or stuffed in the pantry, according to the Center for Biological Diversity. Worldwide, many countries ban or tax bags.

"Annually, 50 billion water bottles are sold globally, including 30 billion in the U.S. That's 1,500 individual water bottles thrown away per second," says Deanna Latson, co-founder of ARIIX, which makes water purification systems, in Bountiful, Utah. "One filter can purify the equivalent of thousands of them a year." The U.S. annual bottle recycling rate is 23 percent.

Beth Terry, of Oakland, California, author of *Plastic-Free: How I Kicked the Plastic Habit and How You Can Too*, offers 100 tips at MyPlasticFreeLife.com, including this planet-saving advice:

- ✓ Opt for bar soap instead of liquid, soap nuts in lieu of plastic-packaged powders, and baking soda and lemon or vinegar rather than sprays to clean.
- ✓ Ask the butcher to wrap meat in paper, forgoing trays and plastic wrap.
- ✓ Buy fruit and vegetables at farmers' markets; return containers for reuse.
- ✓ Turn out-of-fashion garments into cleaning rags; skip plastic scrubbers.
- ✓ Carry reusable water bottles and cloth shopping bags.
- ✓ Avoid over-packaged frozen foods.
- ✓ Use glass jars for leftovers and storage.
- ✓ Buy kitty litter packaged in paper.
- ✓ Choose stainless steel pet food and water bowls.

As a substitute, glass is endlessly recyclable, but facilities are few. Find resource centers at gpi.org/glass-resource-locator.

“Plastic innovations stop at invention and don't follow through to end-of-life solutions,” says Tom Szaky, CEO and founder of TerraCycle, in Trenton, New Jersey. It accepts both basic and difficult-to-recycle waste including pens, laboratory waste, cigarette butts, art supplies, small auto parts, bathroom cleaning waste, toys, candy wrappers and coffee pods (TerraCycle.com).

Contact Influencers

Tell companies when products have excessive or harmful packaging. In Delray Beach, Florida, Saltwater Brewery created biodegradable, safely edible wheat and barley six-pack rings to replace traditional plastic rings that are hazardous to wildlife.

Restaurants routinely provide fresh plastic straws with refills. BYOS (bring your own straw), whether plastic, stainless steel or paper, and let management know why. Americans daily discard 500 million plastic straws (StrawlessOcean.org/alternatives).

“Consumers are willing to change if options are available,” observes Szaky. “Manufacturers need to offer high-quality, reusable products designed for reuse equal or superior in value to single-use, disposable items.”

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