SUSTAINABLE STEPS

Brought to you by Arielle Gerstein
Sustainability Coordinator

Did you know: Single-Use Plastics

Single-use plastics are a huge part of our everyday life, from product packaging to soda bottles, we use an item once and recycle it or throw it away. Plastic has been a popular material since the 1970s due to its convenience for consumers and cost compared to paper or glass. Since the 1950s, 8.3 billion metric tons of plastic have been produced with half of that amount produced in just the past 15 years. Annually, we produce over 830 million tons of plastic with an estimated 50% of that for single-use purposes.

Microplastics found at the beach

So why are single-use plastics a problem? Single-use plastics create a large amount of waste and using an item one time promotes a throwaway mindset. When a piece of plastic goes into a landfill it does not fully decompose and over time breaks down into small pieces called microplastics. Microplastics end up in water, are eaten by wildlife, and even end up inside our bodies.

Plastics also create environmental and human health problems. Plastics are produced from fossil fuels and the process of extracting the fossil fuels and creating plastics emits greenhouse gases, which contributes to climate change. Human exposure to plastics with endocrine disruptor chemicals can cause hormonal imbalances, reproductive problems, and even cancer.

Plastic pollution is a big issue because it not only ends up on our streets but in our water. When plastic bottles are tossed onto the street, they are washed away and often end up in rivers and streams via the storm drains. In 2015, researchers from the University of Georgia estimated that between 4.8 million and 12.7 million metric tons of plastic per year make their way into the oceans via people living within 30 miles of a coast.

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Animals like whales, turtles, and seabirds are the most affected by plastics and microplastics. Recent studies have found plastic in the guts of 90% of the seabirds[1] tested and 100% of turtles.[2] Scientists estimate that by 2050 there will be more plastic than fish in the ocean.[3]

Things you can do to reduce using plastics:

- Swap bottled water for a reusable water bottle
- Keep reusable bags in your car for shopping
- Buy in bulk – avoid individually packaged goods, like snack packs
- Store leftovers in reusable containers rather than using plastic wrap
- Buy reusable cutlery to keep at work or bring in metal cutlery from home
- Support retailers that offer alternatives to plastic packaging

Plastic litter in a waterway

1 Australia's Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organization, 2015
2 University of Exeter and Plymouth Marine Laboratory, 2018
3 Proceedings of the Royal Society B, 2008

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