

WTE Column of May 4, 2014. Editor's Headline: "Do your part, go plastic-free"

Is it possible to go plastic-free? We are awash in plastics. Landfills burst at the seams with the stuff. More plastic has been produced these last ten years than during the whole of the previous century—at huge costs of water and petroleum. Alarming, plastics don't break down for thousands of years. Not that plastics manufacturer are mindful of the waste they produce. Indeed, neither are most users. EcoSuperhero.com wants to change this, beginning with consumers deciding to refuse single-use plastics.

Fully 50 percent of the plastic we use, we use just once. Enough plastic is thrown away each year to circle the earth four times. Every year, Americans use one billion (that's billion with a "b") non-biodegradable plastic shopping bags. The bags create 300,000 tons of landfill waste annually, because only one percent ever gets recycled. Worldwide, around 500 billion plastic bags are used every year. More than one million bags are used every minute.

In 2004, Andy Keller, now Chicobag's president, went to his local landfill and was horrified. Single-use plastic bags blanketed the landscape. On his way home he noticed plastic bags in trees and on fence posts, in gutter puddles, in the streets where they blew about like tumbleweeds. Thus Andy started his Chicobag company—and became an EcoSuperhero supporter.

When Ireland imposed a 15-cent charge per plastic bag in 2002, bag consumption dropped to near zero. In 2008, the average person in Ireland used 27 bags, whereas the average person in Britain used 220.

Recently, the Colorado city of Boulder enacted a 10-cent fee on disposable grocery bags (plastic and paper), and residents started bringing their own reusable bags. Within six months, the use of disposable bags had fallen by 68 percent. Though they are biodegradable, Boulder wisely included paper bags. The Clean Air Council has compiled statistics showing that, every year, Americans use the equivalent of 300 million 100-foot-tall Douglas fir trees in paper and wood products. That's one entire tall tree for each of us—annually! Again, most paper products end up in the trash.

The Sladics Family wondered why and when restaurants started serving drinking straws with glasses of water, milk, iced tea, and soft drinks—and why thousands of families now imitate the trend at home. Is it no longer cool to drink from a glass? The average person in America uses 550 plastic straws every year that don't get recycled and end up as pollutants. If you must use a drinking straw, the family invented "Simply Straws," the reusable EcoSuperhero alternative.

As to the 500 plastic water bottles the average person uses every year: they use twice the amount of water to produce than they serve and, when they break down into small particles that wash into the ocean, fish mistakenly ingest the kernels as food. On the plus side, more and more U.S., campuses and municipalities ban the sale of bottled water. In Maine over a period of eight years, residents prevailed against a water-bottling company that sought to tap their aquifer. In Canada and Germany, customers may redeem plastic bottles, including gallon-size milk bottles and juice bottles, at collection centers.

To recycle just one ton of all the mixed paper thrown away saves the astounding energy equivalent of 185 gallons of gasoline. Recycling one ton of aluminum cans conserves more than 207 million British thermal units (Btus), which is equal to 36 barrels of oil or 1,665 gallons of gasoline.

EcoSuperhero.com wishes to increase awareness of plastic waste to help us avoid these products, beginning with a Plastic-Free Challenge. Earth Month has come and gone, but your 30-day challenge begins on the day the pledge is taken. Once you take the plastics-free challenge, once you become aware that plastics waste natural resources—its manufacture eats up around eight percent of the world's petroleum production—you'll do all you can to avoid throwaway containers. Nevertheless, the challenge is daunting. How do you refrain from stuffing a sandwich into a plastic bag? By putting it into a reusable container that, too, is suspect? New studies suggest that plastic containers, from Tupperware to sippy cups, leach harmful chemicals into the food and drink they hold. And what of the throw-away fast-foods containers of a purchased lunch?

In 2008, consumers were outraged at cancer-causing, endocrine-disrupting BPA in products like baby bottles. Today the plastics industry offers BPA-free alternatives, but recent studies have found that many of those contain chemicals that are as bad as BPA: The replacement chemicals not only affect brain and organ development in children but could even reprogram your cells to cause diseases down the line. On January 28, 2014, researchers at University of California at Davis released their study, "Detection of Estrogenic Activity in Plastic Cups and Plates," which was followed on March 3, 2014, by Mariah Blake in Mother Jones with "The Scary New Evidence on BPA-Free Plastics."

"The real problem here is the deeply flawed and outdated 1976 Toxic Substances Control Act, which presumes that chemicals are safe until proven otherwise. That's why more than 80,000 chemicals are approved for use but have never been tested for their effects on our health," commented a Mother Jones reviewer.

The bottom line? Plastics are bad news. Think of them as hazardous waste; do what you can to avoid them.