

In Our Hands

In her third article about TG's climate change campaign, National Trustee **Maureen Brown** explains how every one of us can help tackle the problem of plastic

The effects of plastic pollution on our oceans and waterways have been well publicised. Who could fail to be affected by the pictures of wildlife caught up in plastic waste, or the knowledge that turtles are starving to death due to ingesting plastic? But there has not been as much discussion about the effect that the production of plastic has on global warming.

The study of how plastic is affecting the health of our oceans, wildlife and ultimately ourselves is in its infancy, but everything so far points to plastic as being detrimental to the environment. The eventual breakdown of plastic releases greenhouse gases. Most plastic is not biodegradable; it breaks down into smaller pieces, microplastics, which are eaten by plankton, moving up the food chain to be eventually eaten by humans.

But the cost to the environment doesn't just happen at the end of the plastic life cycle – greenhouse gases are emitted at every stage. Most plastics start as a fossil fuel that has to be extracted and transported. More gases are released with its refining and manufacture. And finally, of course, there are the gases emitted when we have to manage the waste in a responsible way.

With all the publicity about plastic, you would think that the production of plastic would be slowing down, but this is not the case. In fact, plastic production is continuing to increase. According to *Plastic & Climate: The Hidden Costs of a Plastic Planet*, a report by CIEL, the Center for International Environmental Law, 'Greenhouse gas emissions from the plastic life cycle threaten the ability of the global community to keep global temperature rise below



1.5°C. By 2050, the greenhouse gas emissions from plastic could reach over 56 gigatons – 10-13% of the remaining carbon budget.'

So long as there is a market for plastic, it will continue to be produced and new plastic-refining facilities will continue to be built. It is unrealistic to think we can do without plastic

totally – maybe one day – but it is not unrealistic to think we can stop the growth in plastic production.

As individual consumers of plastic, we can remember to reduce, reuse and recycle.

REDUCE

In the UK we are already ahead of many countries as we have to pay for plastic carrier bags, many of which are reusable, plus in October single-use plastic straws, stirrers and cotton buds were banned in

England. I am sure that many of you already carry your own refillable water bottles when out and about, but have you thought of carrying your own reusable cutlery as well?

REUSE

Reusable water bottles and cutlery are one way to reuse plastic. But what of the many more items made out of plastic?

In order to really reduce plastic production, we will have to rethink how we view plastic. As it is cheaper to produce items in plastic than in other materials, and plastic items are often ridiculously cheap, we do view plastic as a throwaway item.

It is important to ensure that the plastic items we currently have are in use for as long as possible – and, when we no longer have a use for an item, to consider whether it could be used by someone else. If it can, then we should give it away, sell it or donate it to a charity.

RECYCLE

If your plastic item is broken and can't be used anymore, always check out if it can be recycled (see box, right).

Recycling plastic helps the environment in a number of ways: it keeps plastic out of landfill, where it can leach harmful toxins into our waterways; it reduces carbon emissions by stopping it being burnt; and it reduces the need for virgin plastic.

In answer to the question, 'Is recycling just an excuse to carry on producing

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more plastic?', the Clear on Plastics campaign says: 'Recycling one 500ml plastic bottle saves enough energy to power a light bulb for an amazing nine hours; the energy saved comes from not extracting new materials to turn into plastic.' So it's important that when we can't first reduce or reuse, we always recycle.

One problem with recycling, particularly plastic, is the confusion over what can and what can't be recycled. Having lived in many different areas of England and Scotland, I know personally how each area is quite different. At www.recyclenow.com you can use the postcode checker to find out exactly what plastics your area recycles.

If your area does not recycle certain items, it does not necessarily mean it cannot be recycled. Some manufacturers are taking responsibility for their hard-to-recycle packaging and have partnered with the recycling firm TerraCycle to provide free recycling programmes – see www.terracycle.com for details.

To truly see changes to the impact of plastic on the environment, it will take effort and cooperation from Government

and manufacturers. But, as consumers, we can use our spending power to encourage change by supporting products and businesses that are working hard to reduce plastic waste over competing products or businesses that are not making as much effort to do so. Only with a drop in demand will real change happen – and that is something we can all help with, just by putting a little more thought into where our money goes.

Turn to page 28 to read about some great eco businesses turning trash into treasure.



USEFUL RESOURCES

PLASTIC & CLIMATE: THE HIDDEN COSTS OF A PLASTIC PLANET

For the full report, visit www.ciel.org and search for 'plastic & climate'.

CLEAR ON PLASTICS

Take a look at www.clearonplastics.com – whose strapline is 'cutting through the confusion on plastics' – for ideas on how to reduce, reuse and recycle.

RECYCLE NOW

Visit www.recyclenow.com and use the postcode checker to find out which types of plastic are recycled in your area.

TERRACYCLE

Check out the free recycling programmes for hard-to-recycle plastic at www.terracycle.com. These include the Crisp Packet Recycling Scheme, the Medicine Packet Recycling Programme, the ACUVUE® Contact Lens Recycle Programme, the Bread Bag Recycling Programme, and many more.



Take a look at the TiC newsletter about In Our Hands, sent to all members in January

