

Drastic plastic

...it's time to tackle it

Lauren Cope shares 7 ways we can all make a difference



I'd like to think being a journalist makes you fairly switched on to social causes.

We write about injustice almost every day, fight for the wronged and highlight issues that, just a few hours earlier, we'd never heard of. It is, rightly, the bread and butter of what we do. Something I've managed to stay particularly ignorant of, though, is plastic.

I know that single-use plastic is bad. I know recycling is key. I wrote a story last year about the Norwich restaurants leading the charge to get others to ditch plastic straws. I knew that was an admirable achievement. But I didn't really change anything.



I'm not sure what's shifted since then (though the pictures of animals and fish caught up in plastic and debris certainly haven't done any harm).

A trip to Bermuda helped, too. The sea was beautiful. Crystal clear, neon blue and clean. We Brits enjoy it so rarely that it's easy to forget the massive pollution in our seas (it's estimated there are 25 trillion pieces of plastic debris in the ocean).

Either way, I've had a creeping sense of guilt when the urge for a coffee on the go strikes, or I reach for a 5p plastic bag.

Fact corner: It can take a plastic bag anywhere from 10 to 50 years to decompose, 200 for a plastic straw and 450 for a water bottle. Think about how many plastic bottles you've used in the last year. And the year before. And your neighbour. And their year before.

And not only is it dangerous for marine life, but it has the potential to affect our safety too. Exposure to the chemicals in plastic has been linked to some cancers, as well as a host of other disorders. Researchers claim those who eat seafood also ingest 11,000 pieces of micro plastic a year.

While awareness is spreading, with change almost certainly following behind, we are still very much in a society where it's almost impossible to avoid plastic when eating and drinking.

ABOVE:
We can't keep using our oceans as rubbish tips
Picture: Getty Images/iStockphoto

LEFT:
Lauren Cope,
Picture: DENISE BRADLEY

So if you're keen to live with less plastic, here are some pointers.

Carry your own shopping bag

This one's obvious. Since the plastic bag charge came into force in the UK in 2015, the use of single-use plastic bags has reportedly dropped by almost 85pc. We all know it's best to buy - and reuse - a bag for life. A fraction of us probably do it. But a fabric bag which can be folded, stored in a pouch and clipped inside your bag might. They're sold everywhere, and in all sorts of patterns for the fashion conscious...

Just say no

Say no to plastic straws and cutlery when out for dinner, and send a message to eateries. Equally, if you shop online, most places will deliver it loose, rather than in bags.

Buy a travel mug

You know the drill. Not only is it environmentally friendly, but in most places it will save you money. Just fork out for a hardy one - it will cost about five coffees - and REMEMBER IT. And, for that matter, a reusable water bottle - there's plenty of refill stations around the country now, so there's no excuse to buy single-use water bottles on the go.

Avoid packaging in supermarkets

It's easier to grab a bag of carrots, but so much on supermarket shelves comes in unnecessary

packaging. One or two pieces of fruit sold in a plastic tray with plastic films, disproportionately sized packets with a morsel inside - shop wisely, and, where possible, buy loose. You'll probably end up with less waste, too.

Expand that beyond the supermarket

Return to the 1950s with milk deliveries, in glass, reusable bottles. Find loose coffee, rather than packaged. Be aware of shops that are conscious of packaging - Neal's Yard and Lush are two good examples. Lidl offers plastic-free rice and cous cous.

Speak up

Support campaigns which will see action taken. There are currently no brands providing plastic-free crisp packaging. There are, though, petitions. Google, and sign, them.

Make your own

Putting aside coffee and hot drinks, there are plenty of options where it's just as easy to do it yourself. Soup, tomato sauce, pancake batter, smoothies. Where you do shop, buy, and cook, in bulk, to avoid wastage. I'll be honest, it's pretty easy to forget (I love crisps). Habits and lifestyles are so ingrained that grabbing a coffee on the go, or buying a packaged salad (or, yes, crisps) is second nature. And until more of the population adopts the right mindset, it will be an uphill battle. But it's a start.