Nature in the Neighborhood – April 2024 – Planet vs. Plastics

Earth Day 2024 – Planet vs. Plastics

The milk I buy comes in a square cardboard carton, not a plastic jug. Less plastic is good for the environment. Yet it seems that all the cardboard cartons now have a plastic spout where you unscrew a plastic cap, pull out a plastic ring and -- voilà! – you're ready to pour. Milk cartons didn't always have plastic spouts. The old-style gable-top packaging required you to pry apart the two flaps at the "open this side" end of the carton and push them firmly back and then pull them forward to pop out the spout.

This method required a bit more thought and effort and occasionally was less than a hundred percent successful. However, gable-topped cartons-while not entirely plastic free as they are usually lined with plastic-at least omitted additional and arguably unnecessary plastic spouts.

But it comes as no surprise that most cartons are lined with plastic or now have plastic spouts. These days everything in the supermarket seems to be housed in plastic – from ketchup to salad greens - not to mention aisles filled with plastic soda and water bottles. Plus, although banned in a growing number of communities, including some on the Northshore, single-use plastic bags help us carry our plastic-contained groceries home.

As cited on **beyondplastics.org**, more than one million bottles of water are sold every minute around the world. And, according to **earthday.org**, more than 500 billion plastic bags—one million bags per minute—were produced worldwide last year. Single-use plastics, including bottles and bags, have a working life of a few minutes, then persist in the environment and our neighborhood for centuries, if not longer. Even after plastics disintegrate, they remain as microplastics, permeating every niche of life on the planet, including our bodies.

If you're wondering what all this has to do with Earth Day, it's because the theme for Earth Day 2024 is "Planet vs. Plastics."

First celebrated in 1970 in the US and annually observed on every April 22 since, Earth Day is a day for both appreciating the planet we live on and raising an awareness of the issues that threaten it. The objective this year is to draw attention to the detrimental effects of plastics on our environment. The goal is to achieve a 60% reduction in the production of plastics by 2040 and ultimately build a plastic-free future for generations to come.

According to **earthday.org**, "plastic production now has grown to more than 380 million tons per year. More plastic has been produced in the last ten years than in the entire

20th century, and the industry plans to grow explosively for the indefinite future." As a result, plastic waste is piling up on land and choking oceans, lakes, and rivers. Plastic waste is more than just litter, it's more than unsightly. It is proving dangerous to the planet, our health, and wildlife.

Our Marine Environment

An estimated 33 billion pounds of plastic enter the marine environment every year. That's two-garbage trucks' worth of plastic every minute, according to Oceana. This plastic pollution is harmful to aquatic wildlife, such as seabirds, whales, fish, and turtles, who become entangled in it or, thinking it is food, die after ingesting it. To learn more, watch Oceana's video at: youtube.com/watch?v=Yomf5pBN8dY

Our Health

Plastics present a threat to our health because, as they break down into microplastics, they release toxic chemicals into our food and water sources and circulate through the air we breathe. We're eating, drinking, and breathing plastic. Plastics are flowing through our bloodstream. A study published just this March suggests that the presence of microplastics may increase the risk of heart attack and other cardiovascular problems for those with heart disease. A new documentary, "Plastic People," surveys the emerging science on microplastics, arriving at the troubling conclusion that the potential health risks associated with plastic pollution are becoming hard to ignore. Watch the informative trailer at: **plasticpeopledoc.com/film/**

Recycling is not the answer

The oil industry, which is highly invested in plastics because they are made mostly from petrochemicals, has spent millions on ad campaigns to sell the idea that the majority of plastics can be recycled. However, while aluminum, paper, and glass are recycled successfully, plastics are not. For a variety of reasons, only a small percentage of plastics are recycled. Some sources estimate that only about 5 to 6 percent of plastic is recycled, the rest of it goes to the landfill. According to a Center for Climate Integrity February 2024 study, companies knew for decades that recycling was not viable, but motivated by self-interest, promoted it regardless.

What to do?

To achieve the Earth Day 2024 goal of a 60% reduction by 2040, **earthday.org** proposes:

(1) promoting widespread public awareness of the damage done by plastic to human, animal, and all biodiversity's health and demanding more research be conducted on its health implications, including the release of any and all information regarding its effects on the public;

(2) rapidly phasing out all single-use plastics by 2030 and achieving this phase out commitment in the United Nations Treaty on Plastic Pollution in 2024;

(3) demanding policies ending the scourge of fast fashion and the vast amount of plastic it produces and uses. (Though you may not immediately think of them as a source of plastics pollution, textiles contain a high percentage of synthetic fibers. According to **earthday.org**, approximately 85% of garments end up in landfills or incinerators, with only 1% being recycled. "The fast fashion industry annually produces over 100 billion garments. Overproduction and overconsumption have transformed the industry, leading to the disposability of fashion. People now buy 60% more clothing than 15 years ago, but each item is kept for only half as long"); and

(4) investing in innovative technologies and materials to build a plastic-free world.

What can you do?

First and foremost, take time to learn about the issues involving plastics pollution. Start by exploring the **earthday.org** website with information on its Planet vs. Plastics campaign including:

(1) Taking the plastic pollution quizzes at **earthday.org/earth-day-quizzes/**
(2) Calculating your plastics footprint at **earthday.org/plastic-pollution-calculator-2/**
(3) Joining the **earthday.org** plastic detox challenge to reduce your plastic use at **earthday.org/plastic-detox-challenge/**

Other Earth Day Events in the Neighborhood

Salem State University began celebrating "Earth Days" in 2000. The April event has grown to encompass a judged research poster competition, an art exhibition and competition, and a series of lectures, panels, films and activities. These events bring renowned researchers, activists, and officials to the campus to engage students, faculty, staff, alumni, and the larger community. The events are listed on: **salemstate.edu/offices-and-services/sustainability/earth-days.**

I hope everyone will take time on Earth Day this year to honor and celebrate our remarkable planet and join the campaign to fix the problem of plastics pollution.

"*Most of the major environmental challenges we face today result from the accumulation of past decisions and the failure to act in time. Our great task is to fix this".*

- Gaylord Nelson, U.S. Senator and founder of Earth Day