

Our plastics affinity

Idea In Short

When the first plastic, celluloid, was developed, it was a solution to a pressing environmental problem: the hunting of elephants to extinction for ivory. What led up to celluloid, and eventually, plastics' development is now leading to our downfall.

We are what we eat, and what we eat reveals something about what we are in return. The entire human race has been thoughtless enough to have littered the planet with plastics. So, it shouldn't be surprising that humans are now apparently eating plastic!

Surprising discovery

A small trial at the Medical University of Vienna found tiny shreds of it in the digestive systems of people from eight different countries. Six of the eight subjects of the study ate sea fish, but not all of them did. Drinking out of bottles, eating food from wrappings, or tiny particles floating in the air which then land on our food could be potential plastic sources that enter our food chain. With our environment and oceans now so saturated with plastic, it seems inevitable that we were somehow going to ingest it. Plastics leach chemicals that may enter our bloodstreams and cause permanent damage to adults and children. At the same time, it keeps collecting in leaps and bounds in our oceans with no sign of breaking down.

Plastic - the great transformer

In *Plastic: A Toxic Love Story*, writer Susan Freinkel explores the tales of eight objects—the comb, the chair, the Frisbee, the IV bag, the Bic lighter, the grocery bag, the soda bottle, and the credit card—to explore how plastic's fate became so entwined with our own. By turns whimsical and profoundly disturbing, this book gives a lucid account of our past and future with plastic. Among the trends:

- According to the Container Recycling Institute, 100.7 billion plastic beverage bottles were sold in the U.S. in 2014, or 315 bottles per person
- Annually, we use approximately 500 billion plastic bags each year
- We use more than one million bags every minute; a plastic bag has an average working life of 15 minutes
- Packaging is the largest end-use market segment, accounting for just over 40% of total plastic usage

In 1941, imagining the world that plastic would make possible, a pair of British chemists wrote of:

a world of color and right shining surfaces...a world in which man, like a magician, makes what he wants for almost every need.

Plastic has indeed completely transformed our lives. Plastic, with its fantastic and varied properties, has made everything from modern medicine to food safety a possibility. However, considering our health, well-being, and environment, we require urgent changes, both at the micro and macro-levels.

Emerging macro trends

Governments should design & instil new policies, programs, and systems that reward consumers for reducing their plastic use, encourage recycling, and provide opportunities for businesses and consumers to earn revenue. As an example:

- a successful Plastic Bank organisation pilot program has been set up in Haiti in which local residents collect discarded plastic and trade it in for cash.
- Starting 2019, law prohibits grocery stores and supermarkets in South Korea from providing single-use plastic bags to carry food purchases. Wet foods, such as fish and meat, are exempt from this rule. Instead, they are required to provide cloth or paper bags that can be either, recycled or reused. The penalty for violating this law is a fine up to 3 million won (about \$2,700 U.S.).

According to Frans Timmermans, the first vice president of the European Commission, the body responsible for managing the EU's day-to-operations, the European Union is following

a similar path for its 28 member states in an effort to curb the use of plastics that:

take five seconds to produce, you use it for five minutes and it takes 500 years to break down again

Plenty of countries within the EU have their own plans in place to reduce plastic consumption. Furthermore, the EU aims to have all packaging on the continent be reusable or recyclable by 2030.

Summary

At a micro-level, making simple lifestyle changes, such as refusing to use single-use plastic items, passing up straws at restaurants, and informing store managers about unnecessary plastic packaging, would go a long way in reducing our dependency on plastic and easing our way to both, better health and environment. What lifestyle changes are you willing to make? Please share your ideas.