

DROWNING IN A SEA OF PLASTIC

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Right now an estimated 13 million tonnes of plastic, everything from bottles to bags to micro beads, end up in our oceans each year. That's a truck load of rubbish per minute.

The ocean currents are carrying this plastic to every corner of our planet, from Northern Ireland beaches to uninhabited Pacific islands, it has even been found trapped in arctic ice. We are literally drowning in plastic!

But it is the cruelty caused to our wildlife from plastic strewn across the countryside along with the agonising death of sea creatures that is the most heartbreaking of all.

So how easy is it to take action to reduce our use of plastic packaging and is it possible to purchase non-plastic-packaged goods?

If I was to wander to Tesco's right now for example with a bag for life would I succeed in having a plastic packaging free shop?

Starting in the fruit and vegetable aisle I notice most things are offered wrapped in plastic packaging. However, if I am prepared to take the trouble I note a limited number of items are offered loosely. As a result I have limited success in avoiding plastic packaging in my first aisle.

Next it's off to the dairy aisle where I hunt for plastic free yoghurts and milk cartons. I quickly find it's not possible. Next to the meat aisle, where everything from chicken to steak is either wrapped tightly in plastic or set in plastic trays and so it continues until at last I reach the sweet counter where at least I can choose from the pick and mix in a paper bag.

As I leave I notice a coffee shop, but, as expected, my takeaway cup has a plastic lid. Indeed a bit of research shows the cup itself is not even recyclable!

It's becoming clear that it's not going to be possible to do my shop without the packaging. So where does the waste packaging end up? In the recycling bin of course! From here it can end up being reused to make useable end products.....



The solution to drowning in plastic.

However, as my coffee cup proved not all plastic packaging is recyclable. A significant percentage will end up in landfill and that's the problem. This plastic will take over 1,000 years to bio-degrade and will still leave toxic chemicals.

Single use plastics are a major danger to our planet. Single use plastics are items that can only be used once before they are thrown away. These items include plastic knives and forks, coffee cup, lids and straws. But, thanks to work carried out by climate change activists, major retailers such as M&S, McDonalds and Starbucks have announced that they are to go plastic straw free and can save, on average, 1 billion straws by 2025!

But to ask the question, would it not be better to reduce the plastic packaging in the first place and ban all plastic that is not recyclable? Is that possible? Of course it is, however it will come at a financial cost. That cost will be passed to customers and we will all have to pay more.

Marks and Spencer's have recently published figures that show that after one year of their 'Project thin air' initiative they have reduced the plastic packaging on their food by making it a thinner type of film. M&S now use 20% less plastic and these small but significant changes have led to an incredible 75 tonnes of packaging being saved each year!

Another, even better example is the frozen food supermarket, Iceland which has become the first major retailer to commit to eliminating plastic altogether from all of its own brand products.

The onus might be on retailers as they are major contributors to plastic pollution and waste but we all have a responsibility. After all it makes sense

that if we won't buy the product if it's plastic covered, coated or wrapped then stores will soon stop selling it.

If, as consumers we refuse to purchase goods with non recyclable plastic and say no plastic straws in our drinks as well as ditching plastic coffee cups and lids, then retailers will have to sit up and take notice. In a recent Iceland survey 80% out of a sample of 5,000 people polled said they would endorse the move to go plastic free.

So if you want to protect wildlife in our countryside, and swim with dolphins rather than plastic in our seas then let your voice be heard. Let's be the generation who brings an end to literally drowning in plastic!

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