

## Straw Ocean Pollution

### Sydney McCaw # 18

Plastic straws never used to be a problem to the oceans. Maybe that was because many people never actually used straws. Douglas Woodring, founder of the ocean recovery alliance, thinks that people started using straws probably because they were afraid of germs. About ten years ago, straws were mostly just used in bars, now no matter where you go, you get a straw in something as simple as complimentary water. Other than people with medical problems, straws are not needed to drink any beverage. However, the amount of straws that Americans use each day (+500 million) could fill over 125 school buses with straws. All of those straws will eventually go into our environment, including our oceans. In fact, World Economic Forum predicts that by the year 2050 “**seabourne** plastic trash” will **overpopulate** fish. So, how does that affect the ocean? How do the straws get into the ocean in the first place? Is there a way to fix this?

### **How do plastic straws affect the ocean?**

According to National Geographic, single use plastic straws are very harmful for the ocean because they can poison **marine** life when **ingested**, get stuck in their nose, eyes, or mouth, and they can destroy their natural habitats.

You see, “When plastic does make it into the ocean it breaks down into smaller and smaller pieces known as ‘microplastics’ rather than biodegrading or dissolving, which poses great threats to marine life.” says For a Strawless Ocean. Microplastics are very small pieces of plastic that you can barely see. Microplastics get on everything such as coral, the ocean floor, and even fish. That means that when a turtle is eating a piece of seaweed, even when it appears to be clean, they could be ingesting plastic. In fact, “Scientists at the the UGA New Materials Institute **conducted** a new study which discovered microplastic particles smaller than dust or powdered sugar inside baby sea turtles. Of the turtles studied in this research, 100% were found to have eaten plastic. These baby sea turtles were likely dying due to ingested plastic **pollution**, which threatens the species’ survival.” says Laura parker from National Geographic. Microplastics can also be a danger because they can settle on ocean life itself. If a fish were to swim through an area high with microplastics, instead of their natural protectant “slime” covering them, they now have microplastics. Plastic straws, the things that millions drink out of daily, are helping to create these horrible microplastics.

Plastic straws can also harm marine life in solid form too. They can get stuck in ocean creature’s eyes, nose, mouth, and **crevices**. For example, in 2015 a video went viral of a scientist removing a plastic straw stuck in a turtle's nose because it was so horrific. It has been viewed more than 11 million times on Youtube. Imagine if there was

a plastic straw **lodged** up your nose. No matter how hard you tried, you just couldn't get it out. It may cause an infection, but there is nothing you can do. It may stop you from breathing, but still, you are unable to get it out . Your chances of dying are high, but yet, you are helpless. That must be how that turtle was feeling. All from a little plastic tube, that many of us drink out of everyday.



*Here is the turtle from the viral video with the straw in its nose, while people try to get it out to help it to survive.*

Marine life may also mistake solid plastic straws for food. For example, picture plastic straws floating on the ocean's surface while a pelican is in the air looking for food. The pelican doesn't know that they are straws, it just sees something bobbing in the water. So, when it swoops down to get what it thinks is fish, it instead swallows plastic straws. Of course, it cannot digest the straws, so they sit in the poor pelicans stomach and take up room. Later on, the pelican may be hungry again. However, there is too much plastic in its stomach to eat anymore. The pelican eventually dies. For A Strawless Ocean says that in 2050, 99% of seabirds will have had eaten plastic. That is just seabirds. Think about all of the other marine animals that could potentially eat plastic.

Another way plastic straws harm the ocean is by destroying marine life habitats. Plastic can wrap around, land on, and move habitats in the ocean.



*Here is trash on the bottom of the ocean floor.*

For example, this plastic trash shown in the picture above, was not always there. The marine life that lived there before, was most likely forced to find another home because of all the plastic trash that suddenly came into their habitat. How would you feel if your home was being wrecked, and your life was being threatened by trash that would never really disappear?

### **How do straws get into the ocean?**

Straws get into the ocean mainly from getting washed in from the beach. In fact, straws are among the top 10 things found on beach clean ups. But of course, not all of the 500 million straws used by Americans a day are originally dropped on the beach. So how do they get there? Well, one of the ways straws get on the beach, is by them dropping through sorting screens in the recycler, and escaping into our environment. According to For A Strawless Ocean “Most plastic straws are too lightweight to make it through the mechanical recycling sorter. They drop through sorting screens and mix with other materials and are too small to separate.” Then, once the straws fall in with the garbage, they get out into our environment with the rest of the trash they were combined with. Then, through storms, rain, wind, and other natural causes, they end up on the beach. However, that is not the only way straws can end up on beaches. People also may leave them on the beach or at beachside resorts. In addition, straws get out because people litter. Straws could also be blown out of things such as overflowing trash cans, or moving vehicles. Then, when the tide comes up, it washes everything off

the beach and into the ocean.



*This is a picture of straws, and other plastic trash, covering a beach.*

### **Why do we need to fix this problem?**

The main reason that we need to fix the problem of plastic straw pollution is because it has a very bad effect on marine life. Plastic is destroying natural habitats. Plastic is poisoning animals. Plastic is disguising itself as food. And all of these things lead to the death of marine life. Death means less of that species. Then, that means extinction. Imagine raising your kids, and them having no idea what something as simple as a turtle is. You might show them pictures, or videos of turtles. You might even show them your favorite stuffed animal turtle you got at Sea World when you were young. But to your kids, they look at this creature that you once knew, like how you look at a dinosaur. Nonexistent. Do you want that for your future?

Another reason we need to fix the problem of straw ocean pollution is because it will not only affect ocean life, but also us. In fact, according to For A Strawless Ocean, "Research has shown plastic in sea salt, (and) 94% of U.S. tap water." That means that when you come in from a sweaty jog outside on a summer day, and drink a huge glass of cold tap water, you are most likely drinking plastic particles. Another way plastic straw pollution affects humans is because, many of our favorite animals and food sources come from the ocean. When plastic takes over the ocean, it kills what we love and cherish. It may also kill us, because it could take away our major food sources from the ocean. You may not know it, but A LOT comes from the ocean. You see, without fixing this problem of plastic straw pollution, it not only affects marine life, but our lives as well.

## What is the “anti-straw campaign”?

The “Anti -Straw Campaign” is a **campaign** that is persuading people to stop using single use plastic straws, and showing the effects when people do use them. Part of the reason that the “anti- straw campaign” is drawing a lot of attention is because the supporters aren't asking for the laws to be changed. They are just asking that the people using plastic straws, simply stop. The campaign also helps to inspire things like “National Skip the Straw Day” so that we can remember that single use plastics are bad for the environment and to inspire others to not use single use plastics. The “anti - straw campaign” is growing very fast and is the most important part in stopping to use plastic straws.

## How do we solve this problem?

While things like the “anti-straw campaign” are helping to solve the problem of plastic straw pollution, there is still not a clear solution. However, we can help out. There are two major ways to solve this problem. We can get the word across about how bad plastic straws are, and what they are doing to our oceans. We can also stop using single use plastic straws and use reusable straws instead.

We need to get the word out. You can do this in many different ways. One way you can spread the word about how bad straws are is by simply persuading local restaurants or cafes to stop using plastic straws. By doing that, you are helping to eliminate more straws from the environment, and making other people aware about how bad straws are. Another way you can spread the word about straws is by banning, or **boycotting** straws, and making it clear that you are doing so. You can take to social media, and post an inspiring video, or message, about how bad straws are and what they are doing to our environment. You can also hang a sign in public places. Then, even more people will get the message that straws are bad! By making people aware about how bad plastic straws are, it may make them think about how bad other single use plastic items are too. Then, maybe they will join this fight with us! You see, even with your little help of spreading the word it can make a tremendous difference.



*Here is an example of a sign that you could hang up to spread the word about the effects of straws.*

Another way to help, is to stop using single use plastic straws completely, and start using reusable, environmentally safe, straws. Environmentally friendly straws can be stainless steel, glass, silicone, or bamboo straws that can be used time after time. Along with the benefits for the environment, you may also see that using these straws are also cheaper than using single use plastic straws because instead of having to constantly buy more plastic straws, you have reusable ones that you only need to buy once. Also, no plastic pollution is going into the air when they are made, and straw **manufacturing** will be cut down because they are reusable.

### **All summed up**

As you can see, single use plastic straws are very bad for the ocean. They kill marine life, and destroy their home. However, things like the “anti-straw campaign” are helping to fix this problem. They are getting the message across about how horrible plastic straws are. However, you can help too. You can stop using plastic straws completely, and persuade others to do so too. So now it is up to you, because even doing something small can make a big difference. So, what are you going to do to help stop plastic straw pollution?

## **Glossary**

**Seabourne** - “transported or travelling by sea”

**Overpopulate** - “to populate in area in too large numbers”

**Marine** - “found in or produced by the sea”

**Ingested** - “take a substance into the body by swallowing or absorbing it ”

**Conducted** - “led by a guide;managed”

**Pollution** - “something introduced into the environment that is dirty, unclean, or has a harmful effect”

**Crevices** - “a narrow opening”

**Lodged** - “firmly fixed or embedded in a place”

**Boycotting** - “refuse to buy or handle goods as a protest”

**Manufacturing** - “to make something in large amounts, using machinery”

**Campaign** - “a group working in an organized and active way toward a particular goal”

## **Sources**

National Geographic

<https://news.nationalgeographic.com/2017/04/plastic-straws-ocean-trash-environment/>

<https://www.nationalgeographic.com/environment/2018/07/news-plastic-drinking-straw-history-ban/>

<https://www.nationalgeographic.com/travel/features/plastic-straw-single-use-plastics-in-hotels-cruises/>

For a Strawless Ocean

<https://www.strawlessocean.org/faq>

Plastic Pollution Coalition

<https://www.plasticpollutioncoalition.org/no-straw-please>

National Park Service

<https://www.nps.gov/articles/straw-free.htm>

Merriam Webster Dictionary