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Plastic Pollution – No One is Exempt

By Ruth Gaulke | November 30, 2015



Plastic pollution, marine litter – call it what you want, it's trash and breaks down into particles that end up in our oceans. Wildlife eats it – birds mistake much of the plastic that floats for food; turtles, fish, and sharks ingest the marine debris from deeper in the ocean, and a bulk of the trash ends up on our shore lines. We are all responsible in some way.

I recently attended an online class, *Massive Open Online Course (MOOC) on Marine Litter*, about this very topic. There are many takeaways from this class, many of which are technical, but what stood out for me was the segment on leadership.

Most of us have seen the photos of turtles and birds ingesting these items on social media and news venues. We also see whales and dolphins tangled in fishing gear. What can we do? Not all of us live near the ocean. I live in land-locked Colorado. Few of us are high level decision makers. Is there anything we can do?

The answer of course is yes. First, become more knowledgeable about the topic. Learn where the pollution and trash come from and what we can do about it, then share that knowledge regardless of position or location. Secondly, we can change our behavior. We all have a hand in the problem; we can all have a hand in the solution.

According to the [United Nations Environment Programme](#), 80 percent of marine litter comes from inland and 75 percent of it is plastic. Items are thrown away and transported by wind, rain, and rivers. What I hadn't considered was the additional source of marine debris that comes from Abandoned, Lost, or Otherwise Discarded Fishing Gear (ALDFG), lost cargo, and abandoned boats. Fishing line, nets, toys, and other items that we humans think unimaginable to live without float and some sink to the depths of our oceans.



The class is extensive and full of facts and examples of programs currently underway such as [Bye Bye Plastic Bags](#) and [Ocean Sole](#). However, it is not the only source for information. You can search for “marine litter or plastic pollution,” and the search will yield a list of many organizations that are working to address this issue. UPSTREAM is one of them that is beginning a new project, currently called the [Plastic Pollution Policy Project](#).

The class also presented the [Honolulu Strategy](#) as a framework for programs. The Honolulu Strategy is a guide for a comprehensive and global collaborate effort to reduce the ecological, human, health, and economic impacts of marine debris worldwide. It contains three goals:

1. Reduce the amount and impact of land-based litter and solid waste introduced into the marine environment;
2. Reduce the amount and impact of sea-based sources of marine debris including solid waste, lost cargo, ALDFG, and abandoned vessels introduced into the sea;
and
3. Reduce the amount and impact of accumulated marine debris on shorelines, in benthic habitats, and in pelagic waters.

“The diversity of actions and activities shows that actors who want to solve the problem of marine litter can do so in many ways. They can initiate campaigns to raise awareness and trigger political action, they can start clean-ups, carry out research and monitoring, introduce new policies and laws or revise existing ones. Many strategies aim to change the behaviour of others. Whether these are consumers, sailors, large companies or governmental organizations, an important aim is often to make them change their ways of doing or to urge them into action. This is why education and outreach are considered cross-cutting strategies that support other strategies in the Honolulu strategy.” (MOOC Marine Litter class notes)

Educating ourselves is less of a challenge than figuring out how we can change our behaviors.



We have a vacation home in Hawaii and we used to buy cases of water in plastic bottles that we would take to the beach, on hikes, or when we played golf. We recycled those bottles, but I felt a little guilty using all that plastic. So, on the last trip, I bought a water purifier and filled it multiple times a day and then filled reusable water bottles with that filtered water. We didn't buy one case of water that trip (normally we bought at least 2 or 3). It was easy to change that behavior.

Sometimes it's not possible to change behavior, and in those cases a different type of action is necessary, something that [UPSTREAM](#) and other organizations have been working on for some time. But, it presented itself to me personally on a recent trip to see my Mother and Aunt. They moved into a new townhome and on the first morning, I went down to the kitchen to make coffee. In my desperate search to find the coffee pot (turns out Mom has 3), I instead found...wait for it...a Keurig. UGH! My attempts to sway them to make a pot of coffee went unheard, and instead we made individual cups – pumpkin flavor was hard to pass up.

[Keurig](#) plans to start making their cups recyclable but it needs to happen sooner. Now that my Mom and Aunt have moved, they actually recycle! It is a step in the right direction, but these cups end up in the trash because they are not recyclable. We need to push industry to change the composition of these cups to be more environmentally friendly.

That's where the connection to leadership comes in. We do not have to be CEOs, Executive Directors, or government officials. As citizens we can make changes and we can ask and push for changes in the retail industry. It's important to have knowledge and an understanding of the problem, an interest in



making a difference, and opportunity to exert our influence where we can – at home, at work, at school, or our community.



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