



Reducing Plastic Pollution

The winning story for this year's Young Reporters for the Environment Award demonstrates how we can change our habits.

I WAKE UP to a sunny morning, and I immediately fall into my daily routines. Have breakfast, brush my teeth, do homework. Almost everything I touch is made of plastic. The cap to my toothpaste, the keyboard for my computer, the plate I eat from. As I go through the habits that I've practiced for years, I never would have stopped to think just how much plastic is around us, until recently, when I heard of this notion of "plastic pollution."

It's amazing how long I've gone without knowing plastic is actually a problem in our world. I'm days away from turning 13, and I've probably touched a million pieces of plastic in my lifetime. It's not like I didn't know plastic existed. I was well aware that a lot of the things I relied on were made of the material. I hadn't stopped to think about where all that plastic went after throwing it out.

I began to research more about this durable material that was apparently causing a problem. Plastic is impacting the environment around us. Our food chain is delicately balanced: if one species were out of place, the whole thing would fall apart, eventually affecting us humans.

PHOTO BY ABHAYJEET SACHAL SINGH AND FAITH CARSWELL

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Plastic is made to last so that we can use it repeatedly. Ironically, the average plastic bag is used for only 5 to 12 minutes. It's not biodegradable, which means bacteria can't decompose it like food waste. Instead, it slowly degrades into tiny pieces that still cause harm to the environment. Plastic is often swallowed by animals mistakenly thinking it's food, potentially resulting in their death. Since plastic can take up to a thousand years to fully break down, and burning it isn't an option due to harmful toxins that are released in the process, most of the plastic that has been produced is still on our Earth in some form.

Since plastic is such a problem, why hasn't the problem been solved? Shouldn't plastic production be discontinued? The answer isn't that simple. Plastic is so integrated into our lifestyle, giving it up would mean taking away the things we rely on each day. To tackle the issue, we must first address the plastic that we are using every day, especially the disposable kind that ends up in landfills and oceans, where it damages our environment. When considering my daily plastic use, I realized that I used the same plastics often, like my computer or plate. I decided to look at disposable plastic first, because this kind of plastic is more likely to end up in landfills.

I started monitoring the plastic I used every day. I kept a record of it, and also made a note of when I did or didn't recycle my plastic. I found that I used about four disposable plastic products (any kind of product made of plastic or packaged with it) every day, and only recycled a third of what I could have recycled. After noticing this, I decided to try harder to recycle and come up with alternatives for the plastic that I use. I did much better the second time, and after a week I saw that I was recycling more consistently. For the last week of my test, I tried to drastically reduce the amount of plastic I used each day. At the end of the week, I used an average of two plastic products per day.

Monitoring the amount of plastic I used each day helped me be more aware of it, and I made more of a conscious effort to reduce that amount. But this wouldn't solve the problem. I needed to look at other people as well, and how they viewed plastic use in our world.

I created a survey that a total of 124 people took. I asked questions like "How much plastic do you think you use?" and, "Do you think you're using the same types of plastic every day?" Many of the results that came back said the same thing: people weren't always aware of the plastic around them, but almost all of them said plastic was harmful for our environment. What I also found interesting is that 99 people said they use the same plastics regularly, every day. This is similar to what I found out when monitoring my plastic usage: that we use the same plastic products because they are part of our daily routines. I realized this could lead to a potential solution. If we were all aware of the plastic we used, and specifically targeted the plastic we use regularly, we could change our habits and reduce the amount going in landfills.

There are many alternatives to plastic that are available in our world. Options like stainless steel water bottles and fabric bags instead of their plastic counterparts are easy switches and can save money, too. So why don't we all use them? The problem is that we

often forget, because our habits kick in, and starting new habits is challenging. But if we all tried to change even one step in our routines, it would mean reducing plastic usage drastically. Also, as consumers, we can choose to buy products using little plastic or none at all. Subsequently, manufacturers will be forced to use less plastic in their products.

Imagine that plastic pollution isn't a problem. There is no plastic in oceans. Landfills aren't mountains in the distance. There is more wildlife that isn't getting choked by plastic poison. It would be a better world, one that may happen if we all choose to be aware and change our habits. We can't solve a problem if we are adding to it at the same time. If we could get to the point where we're not using any plastic at all, and stop plastic production, then we can deal with the plastic that's already on our Earth. After all, if all good things must come to an end, and plastic doesn't have an end, then how is it good? 

Sophia Schultz, 13 years old from Fort Langley, BC, is the first place winner in the age 11 to 14 category of Environmental Defence Canada's Young Reporters for the Environment (YRE) competition. The photo to the left, by Abhayjeet Sachal Singh and Faith Carswell, Seaquam Secondary School, Delta, BC, won first in the age 15 to 18 category.

Young Reporters Covering Ground

YOUNG REPORTERS FOR THE ENVIRONMENT (YRE) is an international program by the Foundation for Environmental Education (FEE). In 2017, the global YRE competitions attracted more than 250,000 entrants in 35 different countries.

YRE Canada is a program run by Environmental Defence Canada that inspires youth ages 11 to 18 to seek out solutions to environmental issues in their communities and to share their findings through writing, photography, or video.

AJ is a proud supporter and sponsor of the YRE Canada program and competition, and we look forward to getting a chance to review the 2018 competition entries as they get created.

Teachers looking for YRE resources and students wishing to enter the competition should keep an eye on environmentaldefence.ca/yre for the 2018 guidelines. 

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