

The Plastic Trap

The industry has convinced us that recycling will reverse the toxic impact of plastic—while it keeps right on polluting. Here's what you can do to fight back.

By Erica Cirino

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Editor's Note

There's a myth about plastic that has permeated our culture and our minds: All we need to do to get on top of plastic pollution is recycle our water bottles and sip from paper straws. Turns out, we've been sold a bill of goods. In the powerful reported essay here, investigative reporter Erica Cirino dismantles the narrative that we consumers can somehow push back the rising tide of plastic mounting in landfills and poisoning our world. **Instead, while we buy into the public relations narrative that recycling will solve all, the plastics industry continues to emit climate-warming greenhouse gases and toxic, carcinogenic chemicals and particles into water, soil and air. As Cirino argues in this eye-opening piece, the solution is not more recycling: It is continued, critical journalism and political activism to rein the industry in.**

— Pamela Weintraub, co-editor in chief, *OpenMind*

Eating out at a seaside restaurant in Suffolk County, Long Island, not long ago, I was served a drink with a paper straw, the result of local legislation designed to curb plastic pollution. In Suffolk, [distributing](#) single-use plastic straws and stirrers, foam cups, and plastic containers and bags is now illegal, punishable by a fine.

To me, that straw looked more like a problem than a solution. Although targeting consumer behavior can reduce local plastic use and litter, this kind of legislation can't make a dent in the plastic crisis. Besides being too piecemeal to significantly reduce humanity's plastic footprint, bans on items like plastic straws fail to attack the problem at the source: the companies churning out increasing amounts of the stuff.

If straw laws are absurd, what about the more ubiquitous practice of plastic recycling? It has [the same flaws](#), perhaps reducing local litter but failing to address the fundamental cause of the crisis. Recycling diverts attention from the continued production of plastic by an actively expanding industry and infrastructure. Massive lobbying and public relations efforts by the plastic supply chain ensure that we never see the truth. Their outrageous

narrative, that the public must bear responsibility for the plastic piling up all over the planet, leaves them free to make more of it and leaves the rest of us perpetually stuck.

Since 1950, more than 10 billion metric tons of plastics have been manufactured worldwide, with the most of it incorporated into the deadly global waste trade. [Collectively, 79 percent](#) of the plastic humans have thrown away is piled up in landfills and scattered across the land and in the oceans. It's turned out to be horrendously difficult to truly recycle plastic because there are so many types, and each category has to be separated out for a recycling process of its own. Because that isn't feasible, just 9 percent of plastic has been recycled; the rest has been incinerated or sent to landfills.

Plastic is much more than a nuisance and a visual blight. Its production emits climate-warming greenhouse gases, toxic chemicals, and plastic particles into soil, air, and water. Plastic that is littered or dumped or otherwise escapes into nature sickens and kills wildlife and plants. Chemical-laced microplastic particles can now be found commonly in plants and in the bodies of animals—including humans. Research linking plastic to human health problems is still underway, but the health issues linked to thousands of chemical components commonly found in plastic are already well established.

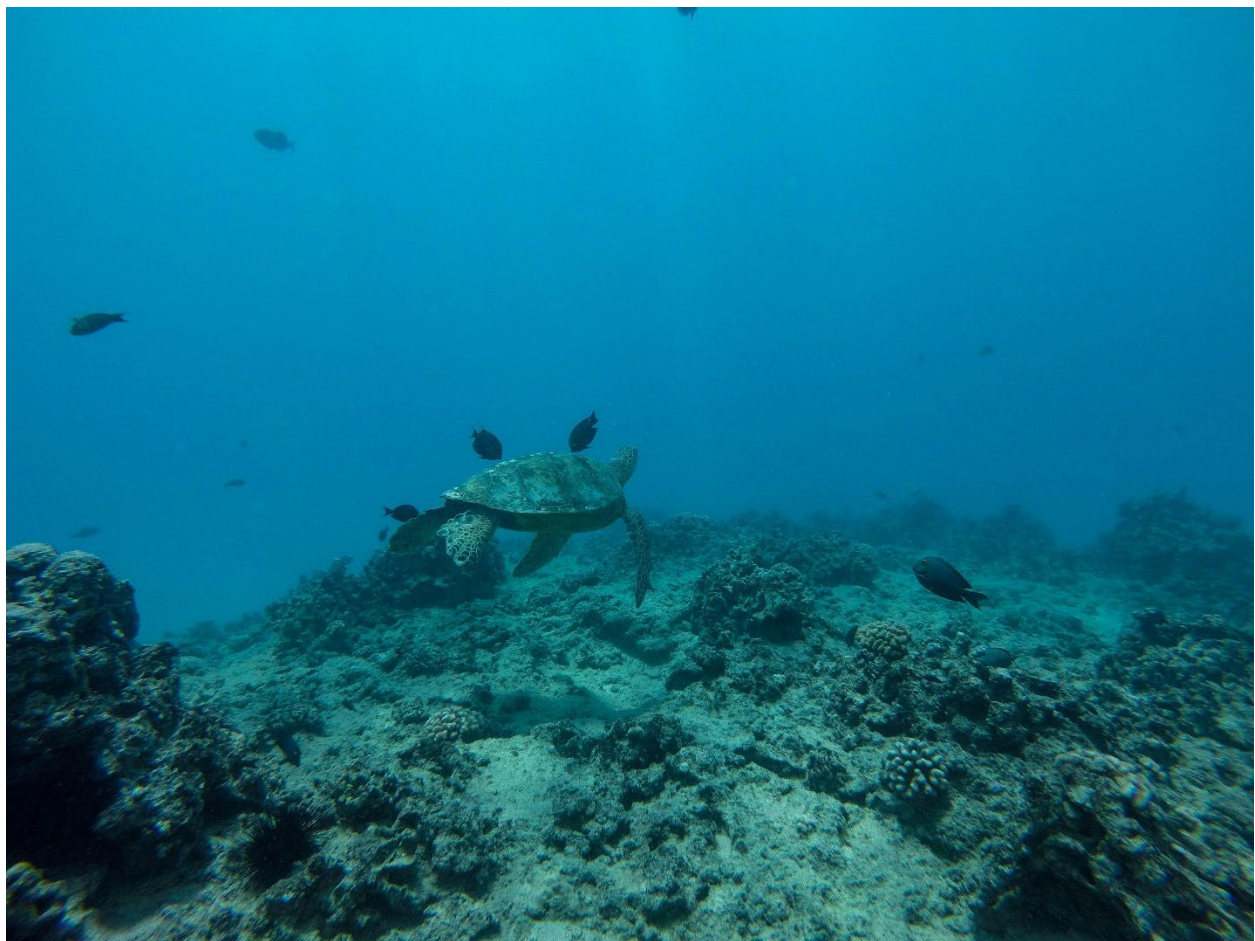


Microplastic in the waters off Kamilo Beach on the Big Island of Hawaii. Credit: Erica Cirino

To the frontline communities living close to petroleum extraction sites, refineries, plastic factories, landfills, recycling centers, waste shipping hubs, incinerators, and illegal dumps, the problems with plastic have long been apparent. Many of these communities have been speaking out for decades and were among the first to hold industries accountable, with varying levels of cooperation from government. African-Americans and other people of color are particularly vulnerable to the potentially deadly consequences of plastic production, from the emissions of cancer-causing dioxins to the asthma-inducing, immune-suppressing, hormone-disrupting particulate matter from factories where it is made. Redlining—the practice of denying financial and other services to minority groups in specific neighborhoods—and the expansion of the petrochemical and plastic industries have conspired to shape a landscape where Black people are 75 percent more likely than whites to live in proximity to industry and more likely to breathe polluted air.

“It’s like they want us to die off,” Sharon Lavigne, founder of the faith-based environmental justice organization RISE St. James, told me. Lavigne, like most of her neighbors in the community of Welcome, in St. James Parish, Louisiana, is Black. Residents there are working hard to stop an enormous plastic complex from being built in their community by an arm of the Taiwanese conglomerate Formosa Group.

Despite all the harm, industry is positioned to produce vastly greater amounts of plastic in years to come. In 2019 plastic producers reported creating about 368 million metric tons of plastic. That number is expected to surge to 1.5 *billion* metric tons per year by 2050 as petrochemical infrastructure expands globally. Instead of developing specific plans for handling this spiraling mess, the plastics industry continues to spread misinformation that perpetuates limited interventions like recycling and paper straws while steadfastly resisting the real solution, a dramatic reduction in plastic production.



Green turtle deals with plastic blight at a bleached reef off the coast of Honolulu. Credit: Erica Cirino

The plastics industry has infiltrated the media.

“The plastics industry has infiltrated the media,” Stiv Wilson, codirector of the Peak Plastic Foundation and executive producer of the Emmy-winning film *The Story of Plastic*, explained to me in a phone call. “The size of the new ethane crackers they’re building [crackers are plants that perform the first step in the process of transforming ethane—a component of natural gas—into plastic products] and the number of fracking wells being drilled to fuel more plastic production tell you the industry’s true intention. Their approach is to distract people so they can keep producing.”

For instance, in one of a series of public relations plays, American Chemistry Council’s plastics division—America’s Plastic Makers, a lobbying group that represents Shell, BASF, ExxonMobil, Dow, and many other Council members—held a virtual “custom” symposium in September 2021 that seemed to be a media event facilitated by the *Wall Street Journal*. The online event was, in fact, an advertorial moderated by Phillipa Leighton-Jones, the editor and anchor of *WSJ*’s branded-content arm, *The Trust*. With her were Bob Patel, then CEO of petrochemical giant LyondellBasell and former chairman of the American Chemistry Council, and his co-panelist, Jim Fitterling, who is the current council chairman and Dow CEO and chairman.

When discussing solutions to the plastics crisis, the executives focused on “advanced recycling,” referring to various means of melting down plastic into simpler petrochemical gases and liquids, some of which could hypothetically be used to make more plastic. In reality the plastic industry has no track record of recycling plastic this way at scale. So far, the method usually “turns plastic scrap into dirty fuel and toxic waste,” Martin Bourque, executive director of the Ecology Center in Berkeley, California, explains. “They are enabling increased production of plastic under the guise that it will be ‘recycled,’ when presently it is not.”

The companies cannot even fulfill their promises for current, non-advanced recycling. Most of the plastic that we haul to our curbs for recycling isn’t recyclable at all. It ends up getting diverted from the recycling stream and sent to be landfilled, incinerated, or shipped to developing nations where imported plastic is often illegally dumped or burned—sometimes just dozens of feet from people’s homes.

That marketing event produced by the *WSJ*’s advertising arm is just the tip of the industry’s disinformation iceberg. Some of the most widely viewed plastic-related messaging comes from Keep America Beautiful, an organization now based in Stamford, Connecticut. In 1953 executives of industries that benefit from the continued production and sale of plastic, including the beverage and tobacco industries (cigarette filters contain microplastics), and municipal representatives launched Keep America Beautiful to promote an ethos of

national cleanliness. Its approach has been to inundate the public with guilt trip-inducing ads that posit the solution to the crisis as cleaning up and recycling.

In 1971 the organization launched its famous “Crying Indian” television ad campaign, featuring an Italian-American actor playing a Native American man who navigates idyllic nature scenes clogged with trash. The mess compels him to shed a single tear, an image that has been viewed billions of times. Noah Ullman, chief marketing officer at Keep America Beautiful, wrote to me that the ad’s “content is problematic” and that the organization will soon address this issue. Regardless of how it packages its message, though, the group stands by its push to make the public responsible for the plastics crisis. “We all need to have a shared responsibility for the convenience of our modern culture,” Ullman wrote.

Finding honest information about plastic pollution is tricky because it is hard to determine which “environmental” nonprofits are funded by the plastics industry and to discern what their true motives are. Sometimes affiliations are clear. The American Recyclable Bag Alliance, for instance, works hard to stop or water down legislation aimed at curbing the plastic crisis by defending the conventional plastic bag—even though plastic bags are not recyclable. In other cases, you have to do some digging. The biggest plastic-focused industry groups, like the Plastics Industry Association (commonly referred to as PLASTICS) and the American Chemistry Council, are now creating a tangle of greenwashed “solutions-based” organizations and campaigns, including the Alliance to End Plastic Waste and the group Positively PET, that paint plastic pollution as a problem consumers have created and can solve themselves. These kinds of groups also fund and advocate for [dangerous ways](#) to handle plastic such as advanced recycling, waste picking, and turning plastic waste into roads and other building materials.

Journalists and activists have recently made progress in exposing this strategy to shift the blame. In 2020 the Changing Markets Foundation published a [comprehensive report](#) shedding light on the plastic industry’s corporate playbook. “While they have been trying to present themselves as part of the solution, they have worked hard behind the scenes to delay and derail mandatory legislation, be it the introduction of deposit return systems or simple bans on problematic items such as plastic bags,” says Nuša Urbancic, campaigns director of the Changing Markets Foundation.

The plastic and petrochemical supply chains continue to refine their greenwashing campaigns.



Denka, operating in the former DuPont facility in LaPlace, La., produces the chemical chloroprene to manufacture neoprene synthetic rubber. EPA reclassified chloroprene as a likely carcinogen in 2010. Credit: Erica Cirino.

John Hocevar, Greenpeace's Oceans Campaign director, has been working to expose the plastic industry's tactics by confronting companies that engage in pro-plastic lobbying. For example, by attending industry conferences and public meetings, Greenpeace members have identified several major corporations that have publicly committed to addressing plastic pollution while quietly belonging to problematic lobbying groups. Such pressure has pushed several prominent brands including Coca-Cola, PepsiCo, SC Johnson, and General Motors to withdraw their membership from PLASTICS.

"There's such widespread concern about plastic pollution that everyone knows we have a problem and have to do something about it," says Hocevar. Making more people aware that the industry bears primary responsibility for the crisis can be used to promote change. "It hurt PLASTICS a lot when many public-facing brands recently pulled out or let their membership lapse when pressed about their membership. Soon the group will be just another representative of the petrochemical sector; it won't be able to speak for the whole supply chain anymore."

For most environmentalists, the goal is to enact meaningful regulation of the plastics industry. In 2019 the European Union adopted the Single-Use Plastics Directive, which banned distribution of 10 plastic items commonly found as litter by 2021. The directive also placed fiscal responsibility for plastic collection, transport, treatment, cleanup, and public awareness on plastic producers instead of consumers. On a global scale, this legislation is a milestone. However, each EU country is individually tasked with meeting the directive's requirements; most are struggling, in large part due to the opposition of the plastic industry, particularly its vocal and well-funded trade groups. The pandemic and associated exceptions some countries have made for sale and use of disposable personal protective equipment have delayed progress as well.

The Break Free From Plastic Pollution Act, reintroduced in the United States last year by Senator Jeff Merkley (D-OR) and Representative Alan Lowenthal (D-CA), has many of the same goals as the EU legislation. But it would inevitably face the same challenges with implementation and enforcement across state lines. Hocevar hopes for a global plastics treaty that could regulate pollution and environmental injustice on an international scale, facilitating a transition to zero-waste communities around the world. In 2021 the United States joined more than 150 nations in supporting the idea. No such treaty yet exists, however.

Meanwhile, the plastic industry just wants to make more plastic. To that end, trade groups and businesses linked to the plastic and petrochemical supply chains continue to refine their greenwashing campaigns. Recently they began supporting the creation of a global plastic treaty, but with the enormous stipulation that it fall under rules that benefit the industry. Those rules include a focus on false solutions, like the largely mythical “advanced recycling,” and go so far as to state that people should “recognize the role plastics play in a lower carbon future.”

A genuine move toward a low-carbon future will require changing our throwaway culture and addiction to fossil fuels—which is, of course, antithetical to the plastic industry's profit motives. The long-running narrative of the plastic straw is a manipulative trope cunningly designed to thwart such genuine progress. Yes, straws often end up strewn along beaches. They can and do harm wildlife, and, like all plastic, they break up into tiny toxic plastic particles. But to hold these industries accountable, we must do a lot more than say no to plastic straws.

We must fundamentally shift our values to reflect the urgent need for environmental protection and remediation and move toward zero-waste practices. We've got to transition to renewable energy sources and eliminate hazards linked to plastic and fossil fuel use. Regulations, environmental lobbying, corporate calling-out, plastic and petrochemical

divestment campaigns, and community organizing can help shape the future we need. The plastic industry may have gotten us into this mess, but good morals and a concerted effort to hold corporations, governments, and ourselves accountable can get us out. In that sense, at least, individual responsibility really does matter. Recycling has limited impact, but individual activism can lead to true change.

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Tools for Readers

HOW TO CHALLENGE THE PLASTICS INDUSTRY AT THE GRASS ROOTS

By Will Fraker

With plastics polluting the oceans, wildlife, and even our own bodies, we're long overdue to tackle the problem at its source—the continued production of plastics. The industry wants us to believe that plastic pollution is a problem of consumer responsibility or recycling technology, but these arguments are nothing more than red herrings, distracting us from the most obvious solution available: **Make less plastic.** Here are some strategies that could help achieve this goal.

Don't fall for greenwashed solutions: “Advanced recycling” or “chemical recycling” is a technology touted by plastic companies as one way to create a “circular economy,” one in which plastics and fossil fuels continue to warm the planet and poison ecosystems without cease. Jargony industry solutions like these are rarely as effective as they're made out to be and make the production of plastic seem like less of a problem than it really is. Don't buy in.

Follow the paper trail: Who is lobbying for a piece of legislation? Who is paying for the advertisements? Do they profit from plastic production? If so, be suspicious, regardless of how “green” the legislation may appear.

Focus political energy on halting plastic production: Helpful legislation can take many forms, from a local plastic bag ban to a more comprehensive approach like Senator Jeff Merkley's Break Free From Plastic Pollution Act. The bigger the scope, the better.

Call out the corporations: Exposing practices that harm the environment and the political lobbying being done behind the scenes is one way to counteract the chokehold the plastic industry has on the media surrounding solutions to the plastic crisis.

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