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Reducing single-use plastics

By Garrett Leahy



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With school now in full swing, lunches abound with single use plastic bags and containers. While single-use plastic items are convenient, they can take centuries to biodegrade, and or end up in the ocean and break down into small, easily ingested pieces called micro-plastics, which can harm marine life, according to the World Wildlife Fund.

Kimberly Lam, a regional manager at RecycleSmart and a board member of a local environmental nonprofit organization, Sustainable Contra Costa, explained some of the ways that people can lower their plastic footprint. She mentioned the importance of reducing the amount of new plastic that people consume, and finding reusable alternatives. "I always keep a metal reusable straw in my backpack, I make sure to ask for my coffee 'for here in a for here cup', and make sure that I don't get plastic utensils when I get take out," said Lam. "I don't know about you but I bet there are several sets of plastic utensils lying in the back seat of my car."

The reason that reducing plastic consumption and reusing plastics is so important is partly because plastic is difficult and sometimes impossible to recycle, even if they are designated as "recyclable." According to Lam, this is for several reasons. One reason is that plastic can only be recycled if it is free of all organic contamination. That means that any leftover peanut butter in a sandwich bag or any dressing in a plastic salad container cannot be recycled unless it is washed. Otherwise, it goes to a landfill.

In recent years, compostable plastics made from organic materials, such as corn, have been used in businesses and cafeterias, but those plastics are often never composted, even if they are put into green bins. "Often these compostable plastics need to be processed for long periods of time at a high temperature, perhaps something like 120 degrees Fahrenheit for six weeks, or something like that," said Lam. "Many composting facilities can't afford to let them (compostable plastics) sit around for that long, and so they are just thrown away." Even at facilities that can compost those plastics, workers sorting the waste can still confuse those plastic items as standard non-compostable plastic and sort them out into the trash by mistake, according to Lam. Even so, there is some value to using compostable plastics over standard plastics. "Some people value that it's not made from petroleum," said Lam.

Sustainable Contra Costa hosts several "challenges" each year, such as the Cleaner Contra Costa Challenge, which is accessed via Sustainable Contra Costa's website. Through the Cleaner Contra Costa Challenge web page, people can create an online profile which helps them set goals toward more sustainable living and create action plans to meet them. Each of the goals includes drop-down menus with educational information on how meeting goals will have an impact. Some of these goals include installing solar panels, opting for fans instead of air conditioning, and reducing and reusing plastic. According to the website, you should shop for items with less packaging, and use reusable items, such as straws and bags, rather than disposable ones.

Sustainable Contra Costa also hosts workshops throughout the year about things such as how to capture and use rainwater and greywater, the water leftover from bathing and washing clothes, for gardening.

If you want to participate in a workshop, you can sign up for those and other events through Sustainable Contra Costa's online calendar: <http://sustainablecoco.org/calendar/>. If you would like to make a donation to Sustainable Contra Costa, you may also do so through their website: <http://sustainablecoco.org>.

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