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Food Waste Is Destroying Our Planet

The amount of food waste in the country has boomed as industries are on a steady production incline. With the constant demand for new products and the uphill battle with the increase in the country's population, food waste is at an all-time high. Food waste and food loss hold two distinct definitions according to Rebecca Sparling, via the Salem Press Encyclopedia, "Food loss occurs when food is lost during production, post-harvest, or processing [...] Food waste occurs during the retail and consumer phases." (Sparling, 1). Food loss is harmful to the planet but not nearly as severe as food waste. At least when a farmer decides crops "[...] do not meet the appearance criteria demanded by grocery stores." (Sparling, 1), they can become compost for the future soil the farmers require. Food waste sometimes involves food that eventually decomposes, yet, it is how the food is packaged that is chipping away at the planet.

Plastic cups, straws, lids, bowls, spoons, forks, individual casings for the spoons and forks; all this plastic for consuming the food that often times is not even finished. Plastic is one of the most dangerous materials, but somehow the most common material. Plastic often does not decompose into the surface, leaving it to sit and release unwanted gases. For the people that choose to understand the dangers

of plastic usage, limiting their amount of plastic is simple. Progress recorded in the United Kingdom is proof for life without plastic. In the article, *UK Government Announces Anti-plastics Measures as More Drinks Companies Ban Straws*, the article evaluates the environmental actions of UK Prime Minister, Theresa May. Theresa May has taken major steps as stated, "The UK's Prime Minister has outlined plans to crack down on plastics and introduce more water fountains, as part of the Government's pledge to eliminate avoidable plastic waste." (Britner, 1). Theresa May's first step to reduce the commonality of plastic shows that change is possible. Even though plastic is wildly convenient, Theresa May "[put] a ban on plastic straws and stirrers across all parts of its global business." (Britner, 1). The Prime Minister's actions are logical and necessary for global improvement. Theresa May supports her decision with a fact that "A straw that is only used on average for 20 minutes can take more than 200 years to break down into smaller pieces and often does not fully disintegrate." (Britner, 1). This fact is a hard truth to face. Almost all drinks are served in plastic cups and don't forget your straw. A single individual that drinks iced coffee daily, takes an eternity to break down only their contribution of plastic.

Landfills and oceans: the two locations where plastic remains. Landfills go through a meticulous process for storing literal tons of wasted food and plastic. According to Rebecca Sparling, "The NRDC notes that Americans waste more than thirty million tons of food each year, which ends up in landfills." (Sparling, 1). The demand for landfills has a positive correlation with the population of people in the world. As the population increases, the amount of food waste increases and therefore the need for landfills increases. The intense reality of landfills is well

stated by Rachel Sparling, "It also costs about \$750 million each year to dispose of this food waste." (Sparling, 1). Sparling also notes that it is landfills "[where], the food breaks down and releases methane, a greenhouse gas that contributes to global warming." (Sparling, 1). As the population increases there is a greater concern to feed the world. Various organizations and governmental budgets are constantly searching for money. What they do not realize, is that the money is buried underground. As stated by *CuyahogaRecycles.org*, "At the working face, the dumped trash is moved around by bulldozers and compactors to maximize the space in the landfill. A layer of dirt is used to cover the trash at the end of every day." ("*Cuyahoga Recycles: Learn About Landfills*"). The Earth is evolving into layers of dirt and trash. The money it takes to manage food waste could be used for other resources.

Aleksandra Kowalska addresses this in her article, "The Issue of Food Losses and Waste and Its Determinants", "We throw away food worth 165 billion dollars per year in America. That's more than the budgets for America's national parks, public libraries, federal prisons, Veteran's health care, the FBI, and the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) combined." (Kowalska, 5). The word 'combined' stings as Kowalska spills about America's true loss. The possibility for environmental research and reduction of plastic usage would work to put an end to the destruction we have created. The need for landfills and the disposal of wasted food is what's keeping issues, like global warming, alive. Recent discovery has been fighting this global warming by using landfill gas emissions for energy. As author Lee states in his article, "Evaluation of Landfill Gas Emissions from Municipal Solid Waste Landfills for the Life-Cycle Analysis of Waste-to-Energy Pathways", "[...] diverting waste

feedstocks from landfills for energy production avoids the emissions that otherwise would occur with landfilling.”(Lee, p.1). This process of emitting the toxic gasses is resourceful and a good start to the aid to global warming, however Lee is contradicted by the information provided by *CuyahogaRecycles.org*. The website lists the steps when eliminating food waste into landfills, the last fact regards closed landfills, “This landfill provides landfill gas to a nearby business, which is used to cook the food.” (*CuyahogaRecycles.org*, Cuyahoga Recycles: Learn About Landfills). Landfill gas is made up of the items in landfills which include large amounts of items that release greenhouse gases and the king himself, plastic. The gas emitted from, in a nutshell, rotting toxic waste is not the most suitable for our land let alone the food we consume.

Waste does not only pile up in landfills, but in oceans as well. Oceans host some of the world’s most endangered species and their predator is food waste. In *Oceans of Plastic Waste*, author Michael Gross states, “Sea birds with stomachs full of plastic waste and turtles entangled in plastic bags have become symbols of the marine litter problem,” (Gross, p. 4).



“**Troubled turtle:** Marine fauna often gets entangled in larger litter items, and seabirds may mistake plastics for food, but the microscopic fragments of plastic waste are likely to add up to an even bigger problem. (Photo: © Karumbé-Uruguay.)” (Gross, 3).

The picture above represents the cruel punishment that many sea creatures involuntarily take part in. “Stomachs full of plastic waste” is how life is for many sea creatures. Rachel Ehrenberg adds, “Marine litter is now 60 to 80 percent plastic, reaching 95 percent in areas, according to a review in the October 2008 Environmental Research. And plastics, including polystyrene, are common in the wards of undigested matter that black-footed albatrosses cough up before fledging, Henry says.” (Ehrenberg, p.1). Ehrenberg introduces that many sea creatures contain traces of plastic in their system at young ages. The endangerment of our sea creatures is becoming larger and larger. Plastic may seem unavoidable for us but, seeing the abusive nature of marine life, plastic is proven optional. Rachel Ehernberg continues, “Baker says, ‘almost all of the plastic that enters the ocean stays in the ocean.’” (Ehernberg, p.1). The only solution to preserving the lives of sea creatures is to stop using plastic all together. Plastic things such as plastic straws can be replaced with paper, aluminum or glass straws. Minor changes in daily life like saying no to straws also known as the rising pledge, *#refusethestraw*, (<http://www.plasticpollutioncoalition.org/no-straw-please/>) can create positive impacts in the quality of marine life.

Despite the endangerment of marine life, this plastic pollution is also working its way into the human body. Author Seltenrich of the *Environment Health Perspectives*, analyzes the way in which plastic pollution plays a role in our lives.

Seltenrich comments, "Studies have demonstrated plastics' tendency to sorb (take up) persistent, bio accumulative, and toxic substances, which are present in trace quantities in almost all water bodies. The constituents of plastics as well as the chemicals and metals they sorb, can travel into the bodies of marine organisms upon consumption [...] where they may concentrate and climb the food chain, ultimately into humans." (Seltenrich, p.1). The "5.25 trillion plastic particles [...] floating on the surface of the sea." (Seltenrich, p.1), do not constitute as red flags for the majority of the human race. The 'Out of sight out of mind' behavior has shown no progress ever since the beginning of plastic use. However, if people knew their food was at risk of having toxic chemicals from plastic waste, would we begin to work towards solutions? What will it take for solutions for the plastic waste epidemic? If the deaths of endangered marine species do not do the trick, than what will?

The speculation with fixing plastic pollution requires a more public way of acknowledgement. An issue that is uncommonly related to food waste and plastic pollution is social class. Social class refers to the ranking an individual holds financially, in comparison with others. Social class shapes the way you can freely live your life and for people on the lower end, plastic is always their first and sometimes only option. Let's face it, plastic is easier and cheaper. Plastic allows sanitary and convenient consumption, for people that want to believe plastic straws are safer for individuals. The cheap characteristic of straws, and various materials, is what continues to increase the food waste levels. As Aleksandra Kowalska mentions in "The Issue of Food Losses and Waste and its Determinants", "[...] the instruments used to prevent food losses will be different in low income, medium

income and high income countries and actually need to be adjusted on each occasion.” (Kowalska, p.4). Low income people do not have the money to buy organic or healthy options that help the environment. This issue is one of the many reasons people believe plastic is necessary. Eco-friendly items can be quite pricy and inconvenient to those who come from lower income households. A solution would be to make paper and aluminum straws more available to the public. The same way plastic straws are seen in restaurants is an easy swap for the more eco-friendly paper straws. These little switches can put an end to plastic and an end to the social class indifference.

The simplicity of conserving the environment has been making an appearance through many strong movements. Whether those impacts be from British Prime Minister, Pernord Ricard or the “Recycling Milestone: FTC allows food and beverage cartons to utilize ‘Please Recycle’” (Fantoni, p.1). Change is in the air and the more people that know the better. The embarrassment of realizing so much waste slipped through our fingers and the amount of endangerment of the marine life is enough to #refusethestraw and begin a different approach to food consumption.

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