

Banning Plastic Straws: Sustainability and Compromise



by Jordan Gass-Poore'

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Cities across the U.S. have banned plastic, single-use straws in an effort to be more environmentally-friendly.



Last summer Seattle, Malibu and San Francisco enacted a ban on the straws in local restaurants, and Los Angeles will soon mimic their move. This legislation follows California’s decision to restrict the use of plastic, single-use straws statewide.

“[The ban on plastic straws] gives leaders an excuse to lead in this realm that normally wouldn’t really stick their neck out on environmental issues,” said Jackie Nunez, founder of [The Last Plastic Straw](#), a movement to eliminate single-use plastic products.

Single-use plastics have become a hot-button issue, and straws are the poster child of this movement. Nunez added.

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The trend of banning plastic straws was partly catalyzed by a 2015 viral [video](#) of a sea turtle with a straw up its nose. Biologists have found that more than 170 species of marine life are affected by ingesting debris.

Experts agree stopping unnecessary plastic straw use is a good idea. Earlier this year, Australian scientists Denise Hardesty and Chris Wilcox [estimated](#) there are nearly 7.5 million plastic straws lying around America's beaches.

But that number pales in comparison to the nearly nine million tons of total plastic trash that enter the ocean annually, according to a 2015 [study](#) by University of Georgia environmental engineering professor Jenna Jambeck.

While plastic waste in the oceans is widely documented, Jambeck admitted the actual amount is unknown. Nonetheless, she said that to truly address the problem, waste management systems need to be improved. If they aren't, there will be an increase of plastics into the oceans by 2025.

Nunez agrees the growing momentum around getting rid of plastic straws is a step in the right direction.

"You can't talk about straws without talking about all the other problems that you have going on with plastics in your communities and in our waste stream," she said.

While banning plastic straws won't solve the world's ecological problems alone, it's an important step that starts conversations about how to reduce plastic waste, said advocate Dune Ives.

She's the executive director of [Lonely Whale](#), an environmental non-profit that started a campaign to get rid of plastic straws. In 2017, the group successfully lobbied for a plastic straw ban in Seattle.

Lonely Whale wants to create a bond between people and the ocean. Ives said it's difficult to get people to care about the oceans, which cover three-quarters of the Earth's surface, especially if they don't live near one.

"You sort of lose the fact that it's there," she said. "You don't know when something's wrong with the ocean because it's just it's so far away and the total effects of our plastic pollution aren't necessarily known to us right now."

She was inspired by Adrian Grenier, a friend and actor who founded Lonely Whale. Every time she'd meet up with him he'd tell the restaurant's staff to not bring plastic straws to the table.

"I was like, 'What is going on with this guy and plastic straws? Is this like a Hollywood actor thing

She saw how Grenier was influencing other customers' decisions by starting a dialogue about plastics pollution.

"Now they're having this conversation with each other, and it's when people start talking to each other that lights start to turn on, and you start influencing each other by building community around this very simple thing that you're trying to do," Ives said.

It's not only customers who should be addressing plastic pollution, but culinary professionals and corporations too, she said, adding that they must play key roles in policy change. For companies ranging from Starbucks to Disney World, eliminating single-use plastic straws is an effort to help reduce their environmental footprint.

Bon Appetit Management Company, the country's largest food service management company, announced last summer that they'll ban plastic straws and stirrers in their 1,000 cafes and restaurants in 33 states by September 2019. Earlier in 2018 the University of Portland became the first U.S. university to ban plastic straws, in partnership with Bon Appetit, the university's food service provider.

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Abstainers from plastic straws have turned to reusable glass, metal and bamboo straws, but these alternatives don't work for everyone. Critics of straw bans point out that some people who are disabled need plastic straws. If the ban is flexible, businesses should supply them on request.

In Seattle the ban does come with an exemption for people with disabilities, where restaurants may provide plastic straws upon request for medical reasons. However, this measure is optional for restaurants, so they may choose to not to make any plastic straws available.

San Francisco-based writer and activist Alice Wong said plastic straws are considered unnecessary items used by environmentalists as a gateway plastic to engage the public on a larger conversation about waste. She wrote in a July, 2018 essay that these bans put an "unfair burden and scrutiny on people with disabilities".

Robyn Powell, an attorney and researcher at the Lurie Institute for Disability Policy at Brandeis University, was born with arthrogryposis, a physical disability that affects her arms and legs. She said she's used plastic straws her entire life and hadn't given it much thought until recently when places started to ban the item.

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“I struggled with this personally because I am pretty environmentally conscious,” Powell said. “I try to do what I can to save the environment. But this is a matter of being able to drink or not drink. I think we can do both without compromising.”

Powell said she fully supports cutting down on plastic waste, but until someone creates a better alternative, plastic straws should continue to be made available to people upon request.

Policymakers haven’t consulted with the disability community when considering the plastic straw ban, she added, which has led to unintended consequences.

“Although we happen to be the largest minority group, we are still really disregarded,” she said. “I don’t know exactly why, but it seems to be that way with most policies.”

There isn’t an easy solution to plastic straw waste. Some environmental activists have suggested providing reusable or compostable straws. The problem, however, is that products made of metal, wood or glass can be dangerous or ineffective for some people with disabilities.

Paper straws, which used to be the norm until the 1950s, can become soggy and a choking hazard. They’re also more expensive than plastic and have yet to become widely available.

Some restaurants and bars are willing to absorb the cost, mitigating expenses by only supplying straws upon request. There really are occasions when drinking straight out of a cup is a workable alternative.

But drinking out of a cup isn’t possible for Powell because she can’t pick it up. She depends on straws to drink independently and thinks it’s important for policymakers to explore straw alternatives the disability community can use and afford.

Powell said the disability community and non-disabled people can work together to focus on the greater goal of saving the environment.

“We’re living in the same environment as non-disabled people,” said Powell. “So, we’re seeing the same consequences, you know, it’s not like we’re living in this utopia where the environment isn’t falling apart around us.”

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