



# DIGBY WELLS

## ENVIRONMENTAL

### Earth Day 2018: End Plastic Pollution

Earth Day brings to light a lot of environmental issues that the human population needs to be cognisant of and engage with. This year, the topic of awareness is plastic pollution. The topic has become extremely relevant in recent years, specifically in relation to the way we interact with and use plastic. The Earth Day Network seeks to provide information to try and change our human attitude and behaviour towards the use of plastics and plastic products. There have been public conversations, research and awareness programmes that have tried to deal with plastic pollution. Unlike many other environmental issues that people could claim to be far removed from, such as deforestation and the loss of animal species in the Amazon, plastic pollution is an issue created by humans that has come back to negatively impact us all. In particular, the major pollutant is single use plastics, such as straws, plastic bags, plastic bottles and food packaging.

Plastic pollution is affecting the marine ecosystem. Marine animals are consuming plastic and the number of species affected by plastic ingestion is alarming. The consequences of this pollution are many, for example; starvation, suffocation, infection, drowning, and entanglement of animals. Two interlinked significances to people, and particularly South Africans, are our constitutional duty and risks to human health.

### A constitutional right and health risk

Section 24 of the Constitution states:

*Everyone has the right—*

*(a) to an environment that is not harmful to their health or well-being; and*

*(b) to have the environment protected, for the benefit of present and future generations, through reasonable legislative and other measures that—*

*(i) prevent pollution and ecological degradation;*

*(ii) promote conservation; and*

*(iii) secure ecologically sustainable development and use of natural resources while promoting justifiable economic and social development.*

Section 24(a) covers the health and well-being of the people. Research has shown that almost all fish species are consuming plastic. According to the National Geographic<sup>1</sup>; “Some

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<sup>1</sup> Parker, L., 2017, Ocean Life Eats Tons of Plastic—Here’s Why That Matters, National Geographic, viewed 22 March 2018 from <https://news.nationalgeographic.com/2017/08/ocean-life-eats-plastic-larvaceans-anchovy-environment/>

700 species of animals and fish...have eaten ocean plastic". The plastic then releases toxins in the body of the fish which will later be caught and sold for consumption. This is merely one example of how human health is being compromised. Therefore; the onus is on the individual as well as private and public sectors to uphold our constitutional right by being informed and demanding transformation.

Section 24(b)(i) states clearly that pollution needs to be mitigated, therefore there needs to be ways that are progressive in realising that programmes are set aside and enough funds are set aside to create awareness and fund organisations whose mission is to curb pollution in all its variations.

Leading to April 22, Earth Day, let us be cognisant of our use of plastic. Be mindful of how our littering affects the world we live in and how as a global community, we need to do better in creating a world that is habitable for all – humans and animals alike. To know more about plastic pollution and the Earth Day Network, click here: <https://www.earthday.org>

### How you can play your part

According to the Position Statement on Single-Use Plastic, compiled by the Endangered Wildlife Trust in November 2016<sup>2</sup>, you can contribute by doing the following:

- Never take that straw;
- Always question the necessity of an item you wish to purchase and consider the packaging – if there is an environmentally friendly option, take it;
- Choose recyclable packaging as far as possible;
- Buy in bulk and decant into smaller, re-usable containers at home (this will also save you money);
- Reuse single-use plastic items if there is no other alternative. If you wash these plastic items, such as bags, bottles, cutlery, etc, these can be used multiple times before being disposed of (or recycled);
- Choose wisely by consciously going for the glass, paper or cardboard packaging options. Avoid frozen foods, and fruit and vegetables which has been pre-prepared, over-packaged and over-priced;
- Choose plastic bags made from biodegradable plastic;

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<sup>2</sup> Environmental Wildlife Trust, 2016, Position Statement on Single-Use Plastic, viewed 22 March 2018 from [https://www.google.com/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&source=web&cd=8&cad=rja&uact=8&ved=0ahUKewjdy-n4x\\_ZAhWFSsAKHVw9DAsQFghqMAc&url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.ewt.org.za%2Fscientific%2520publicatio ns%2Fposition%2520statements%2FEWT%2520Single-use%2520plastic%2520position%2520statement.pdf&usq=AOvVaw2cTBzokTiPttLPhUWq0yLv](https://www.google.com/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&source=web&cd=8&cad=rja&uact=8&ved=0ahUKewjdy-n4x_ZAhWFSsAKHVw9DAsQFghqMAc&url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.ewt.org.za%2Fscientific%2520publicatio ns%2Fposition%2520statements%2FEWT%2520Single-use%2520plastic%2520position%2520statement.pdf&usq=AOvVaw2cTBzokTiPttLPhUWq0yLv)



- Take your own take-away container to the butcher, grocer etc. and take your own re-useable bags to shopping centres;
- If you are very industrious and health conscious, make your own juices, smoothies and even cleaning products ([http://eartheasy.com/live\\_nontoxic\\_solutions.htm](http://eartheasy.com/live_nontoxic_solutions.htm));
- Avoid over packaging your own food, which includes sandwich bags, freezer bags and cling wrap;
- Buy refills. The lids of plastic spray bottles and products with squeezable lids are unlikely to be recycled as they are made from a combination of plastics and other materials such as a metal spring. By buying the product's refill option, you can reuse your spray and squeezable bottles and save some money too; and
- Read what you're buying! Avoid body and face scrubs, shower gels, toothpastes, sunscreens, washing powders etc. containing microbeads (look for polyethylene, polypropylene, polymethyl methacrylate, polyethylene terephthalate, or polystyrene in the list of ingredients). As an alternative to shower gels packaged in plastic bottles or tubes, rather choose soap bars packaged in wax paper or cardboard boxes.

You can also make a difference by challenging our retailers to be more responsible with their packaging.

- Some other useful sites include: <http://www.plasticfreechallenge.org/>
- Consider buying a reusable straw: <https://restraw.co.za/>
- Take the Plastic Free Challenge: <http://www.plasticfreechallenge.org/>
- Guide to Recycling in South Africa: <http://treevolution.co.za/guide-to-recycling-in-sa/>
- 5 tips for identifying and recycling PET plastic: <http://www.goodhousekeeping.co.za/home-organising/how-to-recycle-plastic-the-5-step-plan/>
- Reduce your waste: 10 plastic items you can quit: <https://naturalnerd.co.za/10-plastic-items-you-can-quit/>