A straw and a sea turtle: Why we should stop using single-use plastic

We’re working to end plastic pollution because the single-use plastic items people throw away every day have a real cost for the wildlife with which we share the planet. Here’s Michaela Morris, an associate with our national network’s Oceans program, on how a powerful video brought that cost home for her.

“Have you seen the video of a turtle with a straw in its nose?”

My coworker asked this question the day after I started work as an associate with Environment America. Before she mentioned the clip, I had neither seen nor heard of it. But over the next few weeks, I found references to that same video threaded through many conversations, email chains and articles about plastic pollution. Additional research confirmed: The video was a focal point for the public’s understanding of plastic pollution.

And so, finally, I plugged YouTube into my search bar and watched the turtle video.

‘Eight excruciating minutes’

I made it through less than two minutes of the eight-minute clip. I expected the video to be sad—an article I read in The Intercept described it as “eight excruciating minutes in which marine biologists yank at the plastic straw with pliers.” But I wasn’t prepared for the turtle’s clear emotional and physical distress that the video captures.

At first, the turtle wriggles and shakes as scientists poke and pull at the straw. Her nose begins to drip. She tenses a flipper and paws at the hands of the scientists. The straw still refuses to dislodge. Blood pours down her beak. She whimpers and cries.

“I’m sorry, little one,” one of the marine biologists murmurs. “But I think you’ll be more comfortable after.”

For one of our national network’s campaign associates, the plight of a sea turtle was a powerful reminder of the cost of plastic pollution.

Continued on page 3
Mainers call to protect our parks and public lands

Our members love our parks and public lands, so much so that some of them are willing to declare it to the world—or at least to local passersby.

For a week this August, Environment Maine organizers asked our members and other supporters to display signs like the one pictured below, in order to show their support for fully funding the Land and Water Conservation Fund (LWCF). LWCF has helped preserve such places in Maine as Acadia National Park, Sebago Lake State Park and the Rachel Carson National Wildlife Refuge.

In that same period, energy storage increased 18-fold, and energy saved through utility energy efficiency programs doubled.

“We need to seize the moment,” said Rob Sargent, senior director of our national network’s 100% Renewable Energy campaign, “and lean into a future powered by clean renewable energy.”

Global Warming Solutions team stands against Pres. Trump’s latest climate rollback

As leaders and activists around the world debated how to respond to the climate crisis, our national network made the case for one of America’s best tools against global warming: strong Clean Car standards. On Sept. 18, President Trump announced his plan to block California and any other state from setting stronger auto emission standards than the federal government.

“Transportation is now the No. 1 source of global warming pollution in America,” Morgan wrote. “Rather than stifling innovation at the state level, our federal government should give states an open road to continue taking bold action to reduce global warming pollution.”

On Sept. 19, staff from our national research partner Environment America Research & Policy Center also rallied outside the Environmental Protection Agency headquarters in Washington, D.C., to show our objections. Environment America is challenging the action in court alongside eight other public interest groups.

According to the 2019 edition of “Renewables on the Rise,” a report by our national research partner Environment America Research & Policy Center, the country has witnessed a 40-fold increase in solar power and a threefold increase in wind power since 2009. The wind and the sun now provide enough electricity to power more than 35 million homes.

“We were encouraged when Congress permanently reauthorize America’s best conservation program,” said Steve Blackledge, senior director of our network’s Conservation program. “Now it’s time for Congress to deliver again with full funding.”

Report highlights a decade of tremendous growth in wind and solar power

If you’ve noticed more solar panels, wind turbines and super-efficient LED lightbulbs in the past few years, you’re not alone.

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The camera keeps the turtle's eyes—dark and big—in sharp focus throughout the entire video. She blinks them shut and shrugs away as the scientists dig for the straw. Eventually, her glassy eyes fill with pain and then glaze over. She looks despondent, exhausted and hurt.

The video provides visceral imagery of the suffering caused by single-use plastic. Marine animals, like this turtle, dive through the ocean, eat, and nurse their young. They do not deserve to suffer extraordinary pain because of the vast quantities of disposable plastic products that end up in the sea.

**Solutions within our reach**

We have alternatives. We can and must shift toward compostable and reusable options. And, fortunately, states, cities and companies are doing this by adopting policies that phase out single-use plastics.

In 2019, New York, Maine, Vermont, Connecticut, Oregon and Delaware all banned single-use plastic bags, joining California, which banned them in 2016. Maine also became the first state to ban single-use polystyrene foam containers, and Maryland became the second a month later. Our network's staff helped win the laws in Maine, Connecticut, Oregon and Maryland—and very nearly won an even more comprehensive law in California. While the California Legislature failed to act on the bill this year, our team is ready to keep working in 2020 to get it over the finish line.

Across the country, more than 200 cities and communities have passed foam bans of their own, from San Francisco to Minneapolis to Baltimore.

Some companies are getting the message, too. In January 2018, McDonald's made a commitment to phase out foam cups and containers worldwide and replace them with 100 percent recycled materials. Dunkin' Donuts has pledged to do the same—which means an estimated 1 billion fewer foam cups will end up in the waste stream each year.

We need to keep pushing more states, cities and companies in this direction. The wide, innocent eyes of the sea turtle deliver a clear signal: We must choose wildlife over waste.

By Michaela Morris, associate, Our Oceans program

Originally published at https://environmentamerica.org

Learn more about our Wildlife Over Waste Campaign at https://environmentmaine.org/feature/mee/wildlife-over-waste

Above: Michaela Morris (center) with Mass. state Sens. Jamie Eldridge and Michael Barrett with Environment Massachusetts' Ben Hellerstein at an event to reduce single-use plastic. Below: Supporters call to choose Wildlife Over Waste.
Help may be on the way for the pollinators that bring life to Maine gardens and food to our tables.

Environment Maine staff on Aug. 5 met with Maine Department of Agriculture, Conservation and Forestry Commissioner Amanda Beal to deliver nearly 9,000 petition signatures calling for a moratorium on bee-killing pesticides. Across the country, millions of bees are dying off. Neonicotinoid insecticides, known as neonics, are a primary culprit. We know Gov. Janet Mills is sympathetic: She had two bee hives installed at the governor’s residence in May.

“We must not stand any longer for the use of these pesticides, so carelessly used despite their direct impact on our bees,” Environment Maine canvasser Elijah Munro-Ludders wrote in a letter to the editor of the Press Herald.

Our canvassers spent the summer educating Mainers on the vital role that bees play in our ecosystem, the dangers they face, and how we can save them.