

Why you shouldn't be a 'straw-man' environmentalist

July 25 2018, by Riley Schnurr And Tony Robert Walker



Credit: Cup of Couple from Pexels

The "straw bubble" has burst.

We're midway through 2018, and we have seen an explosion of efforts

and local action to eliminate [plastic](#) straws. Some of the world's largest companies, including McDonald's and [Starbucks](#), have banned them from some of their operations.

McDonald's announced recently that it would [replace plastic straws with paper ones in all restaurants in the U.K. and Ireland by September 2018](#). Similarly, Starbucks will [eliminate plastic straws from all of its stores globally by 2020](#).

Airlines, hotel chains and local restaurants in droves are all removing the ubiquitous plastic from their consumer services.

Dramatic and evocative statements and statistics, including the infamous "[plastic will outweigh fish in the ocean by 2050](#)" prophecy, are inciting some incredible interventions from governments, large multinationals and individual citizens. Although these kinds of statements may not be entirely accurate, the overwhelming response has been the removal of straws from day-to-day society.

Anti-straw backlash

Along with these recent "anti-[straw](#)" endeavours, there comes an accompanying "anti-anti-straw" rhetoric that opposes such interventions on various grounds.

For instance, disability rights activists have weighed in on the plastic-straw ban. Some people with disabilities need straws to drink because they have trouble swallowing or cannot lift or hold a cup.

A plethora of alternatives to plastic straws exist to provide practical solutions, including silicone, paper and stainless steel. Ultimately, this means all consumers have an ethical choice to make: [planet or plastic?](#)

We don't contest the importance of accessibility, which is why we do not argue in favour of an absolute outright ban on straws. Rather, we believe that "[having a disability and doing your part to help the environment are not mutually exclusive](#)."

The anti-anti-straw arguments we take issue with are often either libertarian (hands off my straws) or pessimistic (this does not address the root cause of the problem) in nature. Some of these arguments are a mix of both.

A [slew of journalists and writers](#) have recently put forward [counter-arguments](#) to interventions seeking to reduce ocean plastics. They write that targeting straws specifically will not make a significant difference to the ocean.

Quantitatively, sure, straws make up a small portion of the plastics that enter and contaminate the ocean ([roughly four per cent of litter](#)). This does not mean, however, that straws aren't worth addressing.

Why is a targeted effort towards four per cent of [marine litter](#) being attacked as useless or ineffective, when the posited alternative is no effort at all?

Target "gateway plastic"

Great Canadian Shoreline Cleanup's annual [Dirty Dozen list](#) highlights the items most commonly found on [marine and freshwater shores](#). Straws rank ninth, below cigarette butts, food packaging, bottle caps and [plastic bags](#).

Other [studies have found similar contributions to marine litter from plastic straws](#). The [UNEP 2018 State of Plastics report](#) also ranks straws and stirrers in seventh place for plastics found in the environment.

However, these other plastics require an entirely different approach to mitigating their entry into the environment.

Should we focus on an outright ban on cigarettes with the same vigour as we have straws? Can we vilify single-use plastic bottle beverage industry players in the same manner?

Presumably, those who are anti-anti-straw would respond accordingly, if not an order of magnitude greater, to these kinds of petitions.

War on straws

Dune Ives, the executive director of the Lonely Whale Foundation, [has called straws "the gateway plastic"](#) for those on the verge of environmentalism. For example, something as mundane or "playful" as a straw can open up a larger, more serious conversation about plastic pollution, or global mass consumption even more broadly.

This point is both the crux of the "war on straws" and the crucial piece moving forward in the overall endeavour to reduce marine plastic pollution: changing the norm.

Comparisons may also be made with plastic bag bans. For example, many [countries and jurisdictions around the world have successfully implemented plastic bag bans or taxes](#) to reduce plastic environmental pollution.

Like plastic straws, some groups suggest [that because plastic bags are ultra-lightweight, they likely make negligible contributions to municipal waste](#). These groups also claim that banning plastic bags is more about appearances and idealism than about protecting the environment. However, like plastic bag bans, the concept of eliminating or replacing single-use plastic (SUP) straws requires a revolution in consumer

mentality.

Changing habits

There is no radical extreme call to immediately stop the production of plastic products. Indeed, shaming plastic use has been seen as an ineffective way to get more people on board.

Plastics are imperative in many contexts, including sterile packaging and disposable tools in medicine, reducing food spoilage and increasing food safety. The movement to remove SUP straws, or even bags, should consider these nuances, but it is far from destroying the foundation of modern society.

With about [eight million to 12 million metric tonnes of plastic entering our oceans each year](#), there is an urgent need to [address our pervasive plastic problem](#).

We need a broad-scale and widespread approach that questions our throw-away culture, and the overwhelming trend to buy more, buy bigger and buy more often. Avoiding the use of a plastic straw may seem trivial, but it counts.

It may seem like a drop in the ocean, but what is an ocean anyway but many, many, drops?

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