

The Plastic Inconvenience

Anna Seery, GOS Communications Advisor

Earth Day 2018 fell on April 22 and one of the main topics highlighted this year was the negative environmental impact plastic waste has on our planet.

This is an issue that I have been personally concerned about for a while. At the beginning of the year, in a drive to further increase household participation in recycling, the local council provided residents with a new orange and black bin to recycle plastics.

The arrival of this bin really brought home the volume of waste we (a family of 3) produce. Every week our 125-litre bin is always half full and on some occasions, e.g. Christmas, a minor house renovation, or an impromptu BBQ, the bin overflows making additional trips to the recycling centre a necessity.

This got me thinking: if my small family can produce such a significant amount of plastic waste within a week, surely this must be replicated on every street throughout the country!

Globally we have produced more disposable plastic in the last decade than we did during the 20th century and it is set to grow by 40% in the coming years.

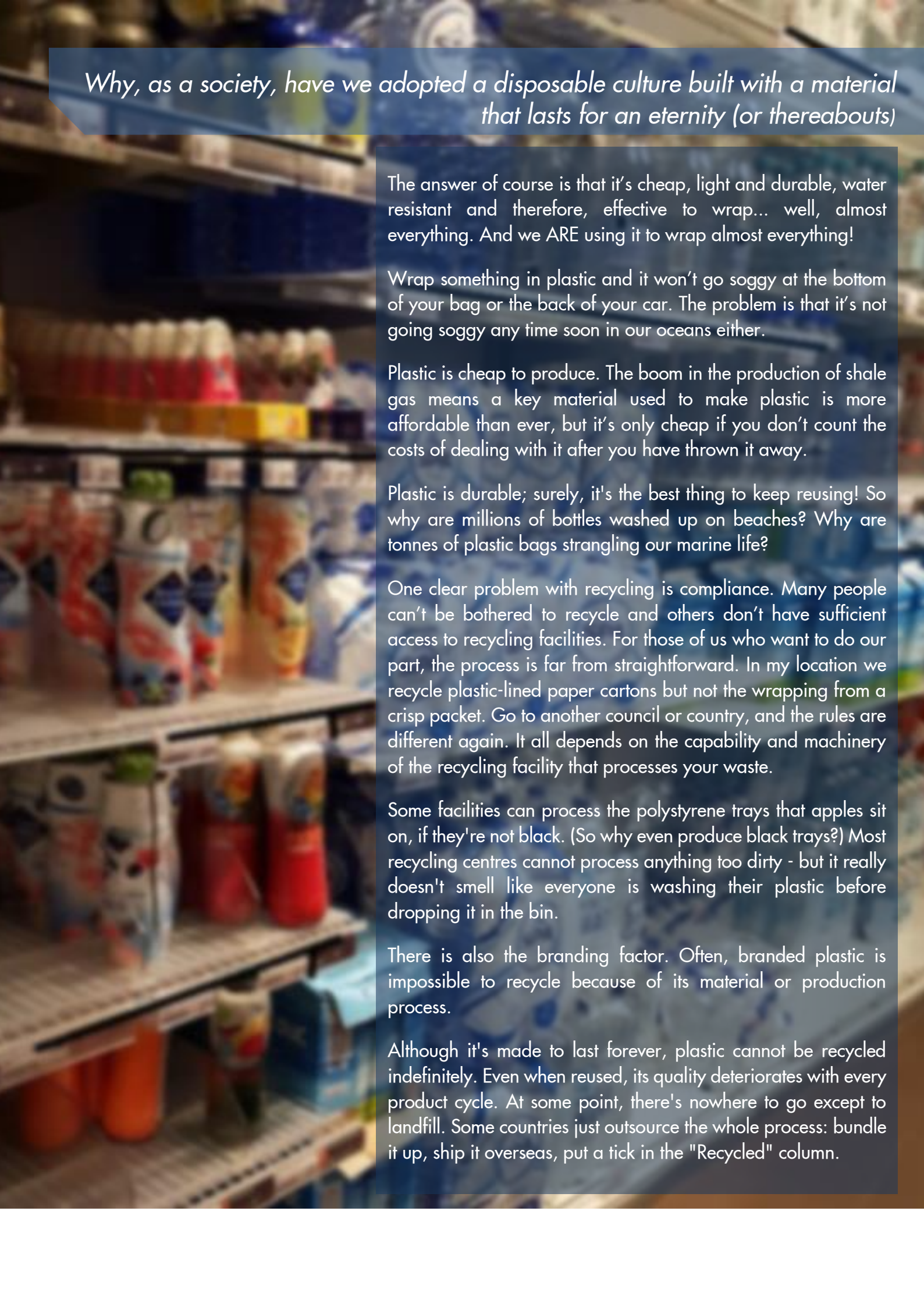
To diminish my guilt and look for ways to reduce the impact of plastic, I discovered a local initiative in The Hague called "100-100-100", a national programme that challenges 100 families to live 100% rubbish-free for 100 days.

It is encouraging that the country I live in actively invests in waste management and recycling programmes like this. Yet I am not convinced it is as simple as dropping a bottle top into the correct bin. And this leads to a bigger question: why are the bottle and top made from plastic in the first place?

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central-hr-Globaloutpostservices@shell.com





Why, as a society, have we adopted a disposable culture built with a material that lasts for an eternity (or thereabouts)

The answer of course is that it's cheap, light and durable, water resistant and therefore, effective to wrap... well, almost everything. And we ARE using it to wrap almost everything!

Wrap something in plastic and it won't go soggy at the bottom of your bag or the back of your car. The problem is that it's not going soggy any time soon in our oceans either.

Plastic is cheap to produce. The boom in the production of shale gas means a key material used to make plastic is more affordable than ever, but it's only cheap if you don't count the costs of dealing with it after you have thrown it away.

Plastic is durable; surely, it's the best thing to keep reusing! So why are millions of bottles washed up on beaches? Why are tonnes of plastic bags strangling our marine life?

One clear problem with recycling is compliance. Many people can't be bothered to recycle and others don't have sufficient access to recycling facilities. For those of us who want to do our part, the process is far from straightforward. In my location we recycle plastic-lined paper cartons but not the wrapping from a crisp packet. Go to another council or country, and the rules are different again. It all depends on the capability and machinery of the recycling facility that processes your waste.

Some facilities can process the polystyrene trays that apples sit on, if they're not black. (So why even produce black trays?) Most recycling centres cannot process anything too dirty - but it really doesn't smell like everyone is washing their plastic before dropping it in the bin.

There is also the branding factor. Often, branded plastic is impossible to recycle because of its material or production process.

Although it's made to last forever, plastic cannot be recycled indefinitely. Even when reused, its quality deteriorates with every product cycle. At some point, there's nowhere to go except to landfill. Some countries just outsource the whole process: bundle it up, ship it overseas, put a tick in the "Recycled" column.

What happens to plastic waste that's shipped outside our jurisdiction? Who processes it, and at what cost to their health? Does recycling really solve the issues our current consumption of plastic is creating?

What's the alternative to recycling?

I found an article about a Californian woman who has reduced her annual plastic waste to a glass jar; ONE and I have a full bin every week. Where and how does she source her products?



It turns out that she shops locally, mainly in markets, armed with her own bags and clean, empty jars for 'runnier' items. I decide to give this 'not buying plastic' approach a try to see how viable it is in The Hague.

In our mainstream supermarkets you are unlikely to find many products without plastic packaging. A cucumber comes encased in a plastic sheath. Meat, dried goods, sweets, frozen products can all be found in plastic or plastic-lined packaging. Even glass jars have a plastic seal on the lid.

Choosing tinned goods also doesn't mean going plastic-free. For ease of transport and distribution, suppliers wrap the cans together in small trays, using of course, plastic.

We have a few organic supermarkets around, and they fare a little better, but only in the fresh produce section. You can weigh fruit and veg and put them into paper bags.

At the Haagse Markt, one of the largest open-air markets in Europe, it is a sea of thin blue plastic bags. What about the EU levy to curb the use of lightweight plastic bags? At least here the vendors are happy to tip their produce off the scales directly into your own shopping bag.

I didn't encounter the same outcome in our small local shops. My initial attempt at persuading a butcher to give me minced meat in my own Tupperware was less than successful. My request felt like an inconvenience. They did give me meat in my own container... after putting a plastic bag on the scale for hygiene purposes. Then despite weighing my container 3 times, at home, I ended up 100g short of the mince I paid for.

And what of detergents and toiletries? I can't buy those using my own jars. In my Californian heroine's blog, I found recipes for toiletries and household cleaning products. She makes her own and stores them in reusable containers.

I have tried making shampoo in the past. While some achieve wonderful results I'm sure; I made a substance that took days to pry from my blatantly, still-dirty hair, and the base ingredient for the mix came in a plastic bottle.

"Globally we have produced more disposable plastic in the last decade than we did during the 20th century"

Overall, I felt quite deflated at the end of my research. I discovered that with a serious amount of effort, I can reduce the amount of plastic I buy; but even then, I cannot eliminate it. Also, there are not enough of similar-minded people to make a difference yet. How do we move the option to buy without plastic beyond the fringe, into the mainstream?

If I am to succeed in not buying plastic, then society needs to make it easier for us all to succeed.

We need both the carrot and the stick approach. Switzerland charges its residents directly for the waste they produce. Like the introduction of a mandatory fee for plastic bags at checkouts, we know that this measure creates change. Maybe this could be extended to the whole manufacture and supply chain, as an effort to half the explosion in plastic production.

I hope to see more retailers take steps to make buying products without plastic packaging easier. An example of this initiative comes from the supermarket chain EkoPlaza partnering up with A Plastic Planet, an environmental campaign group, to create the world's first plastic-free supermarket aisle at their Amsterdam store.

Since March this year, 680 products packaged in biodegradable materials have been made available. EkoPlaza intends to roll this out across all their 74 stores; so hopefully by June this year, I'll be shopping at that aisle in The Hague. See you there!

If this issue is of interest to you, please follow the link below to find out what you can do.

<https://www.earthday.org/>



Reference Material and Additional Information

Guardian April 2018 plastics

<https://www.theguardian.com/environment/plastic?page=2>

Environmental Benefits of Recycling

[http://www.wrap.org.uk/sites/files/wrap/Environmental benefits of recycling 2010 update.3b174d59.8816.pdf](http://www.wrap.org.uk/sites/files/wrap/Environmental%20benefits%20of%20recycling%202010%20update.3b174d59.8816.pdf)

Zero Waste

<https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2016/apr/22/zero-waste-millennial-bloggers-trash-greenhouse-gas-emissions>

100- 100 -100 imitative

<http://duurzaamdenhaag.nl/afval>

Circular Economy

<https://www.government.nl/topics/circular-economy/contents/from-a-linear-to-a-circular-economy>

Ellen MacArthur Foundation

<http://ellenmacarthur.com/>

UK Plastic recycling

<https://energydesk.greenpeace.org/2017/03/13/data-uk-exporting-two-thirds-plastic-waste-amidst-concerns-illegal-practice/>

The truth about Recycling

<http://www.economist.com/node/9249262>