Plastic Cutlery’s Cut into Ocean Life by Elizabeth Quach

Squirming around restlessly, the medium-sized glinting fish continued to struggle uselessly around a ½ inch piece of plastic fork stuck in its side.

“Let’s go, Gia Ân,” my dad called to me in Vietnamese, “There’s nothing we can do now.”

Sliding up slowly to my feet, I managed to drag away my shocked eyes from the bleeding out fish on the shore of Da Nang, a coast off the side of my father’s home town we decided to visit in the summer of 2016. I hooked my grubby fingers around my father’s, and we continued walking across the gritty beach filled for miles on end with forgotten styrofoam cups, plastic spoons, and worst of all, straws. I had never before seen such an immense amount of waste before, and the sickening feeling of highlighter-yellow plastic bags scattered everywhere combined with the slimy slickness of them on my skin guaranteed the memory would last with me forever. The horrid sight was also what prompted me to create my own reusable cutlery company called EcoTensil 3 years later to combat this.

The 21st century is the most innovative, inventive, and ingenious time in the entire history of the world. Despite this, it is also unfortunately the most wasteful. Capitalism has pushed convenience over conservation, fueling the pockets of large industries and companies to choose easy to produce plastic over more sustainable options like glass or other reusable materials. What our world has become is one doomed to destruction, especially to our ocean life and the organisms who are the ones being affected by billions of pounds of plastic.
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More specifically, the effects plastic straws have on organisms such as turtles and other marine life are especially problematic. What makes plastic straws different is the small size of each tube. To begin with, their 7 mm–14 mm average size and incredibly light weight are obstacles when trying to recycle. In addition, straws are so easily bendable and slippery that they are able to slide out of recycling machines or fall out of sorting units (Reddy). This poses the first stage of the issues with straws specifically being able to reach ocean life. Secondly, their small size allows the straws to be blown out of landfills, trash cans, etc instead of just staying in one place.

In regards to plain waste, straws are on the top 10 list of most common trash items to be littered on beaches (Chow). This is due to the abundant use of single-use straws for beach drinks, family gatherings, and outdoor eating without responsibility. These straws get thrown on the sand without thought, maybe because it is so small people don’t think one piece of trash will damage the ocean that much, and soon the ocean is full of them. The International Coastal Cleanup picked up a total of 6 million straws for the one day a year pickup they did for 25 years (that’s 6 million straws in 25 days of pickup!).

The danger straws pose to ocean life is incredibly harmful. Plastic takes over 200 years to decompose (“The Lifestyle of Plastics”). The centuries it takes to break down completely are years in which straws decompose into small bits of microplastic. Microplastic doesn’t dissolve or decompose like paper in soil, and
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instead goes further in harming the ocean life because of its smaller size. Research study has shown that in around 3 decades, 99% of sea birds will have ingested some form of plastic, which could have up to a 50% chance of killing the sea birds (Wilcox). These dangers do not even include the physical dangers that straws going through the flesh of ocean life could have. Many videos have shown turtles and other species who have been impaled by plastic straws in their habitat, only able to get them out with the interference of pliers or something equally as gripping. These wildlife creatures will be permanently damaged from the intrusion, especially if they are not able to get the straw out.

The consumption of plastic waste leads to starvation. This is because some ocean life could eat plastic until their stomachs are filled, mistakenly believing they are full and die from starvation. Eating plastic could also lead to suffocation because it blocks waterways and the mouth areas of organisms (Reddy). Not only does this affect organisms which are easily susceptible to eating plastics, the chain reaction climbs steadily up the ladder to attack larger and more keener mammals like dolphins as well, who can eat the smaller fish and food who have consumed plastic. This poses the threat of the entire ocean life being decimated by plastics, and the situation is only getting more dire. Every year, the already enormous amount of 150 million metric tons of ocean plastic is being increased by approximately 8 million tons more (Jordan).
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With my memory of the struggling fish 4 years ago still fresh in my mind, combined with heart-wrenching videos of turtles being harmed by straws, I was finally spurred into action. As a highschool student, I knew there was something I wanted to do to help my environment, but I recognized my limitations in transportation to ocean clean ups and other campaigns far away from my city. I myself am interested in the business field, with past experiences as Historian for my DECA club (Distributive Education Clubs of America), where I also competed for 2 years in a row and made it to State competitions in the Marketing Division. Through this interest, an idea came to me in which I could further a movement important to me while engaging in a way that stimulated my drive for action.

Together with a small group of 7 friends and with the support of our school club Junior Achievement, EcoTensil was born. Our goal is to raise funds by selling our sustainable bamboo utensils, including a metal straw in a reusable pouch to donate back to the ocean-cleaning movement. So far, we have been able to sell over 70 units in our community and sold around $500 worth of products in only a few months. I personally took on the Management role in the team, coordinating group meetings and events to discuss our goals in relation to ocean pollution and how to realistically reach them with our products and funding. Not only were we able to sell all our units, our product won Honorable Mention for Most Innovative Product at a Junior Achievement Trade Fair, inspiring other companies to create eco-friendly products as well. Though our impact is still minimal in regards to the
amount of waste still being dumped into oceans and threatening the lives of turtles, endangered whales, and other sea life, I believe our efforts are still substantial in creating a cleaner environment and inciting change for the future. Our advertisements to our school exposed around 2,400 students in itself to the dangers of plastic to animals. Furthermore, our marketing in trade fairs, local cafes, and other shops also continued our impact. The simple idea of offering alternatives to plastic cutlery as well as educating our small community on the dangers of plastic to the ocean life filled the hole that was left in my heart after seeing the struggling fish that day in Da Nang four years ago.

Not only do I wish to continue expanding the business, my future endeavors in pursuing a finance and international business degree in college would be a monumental step into being able to tie in my assets to helping causes I feel strongly about. With this scholarship, I hope to be able to further my reach in being able to help save more ocean life from the horrors of modern-day excess, especially in regards to plastic. I know with greater knowledge, I will be able to formulate better strategies to create an even larger impact in the lives of the sea ocean. My ultimate goal is to go back to Vietnam and personally take part in the ocean cleanups, as well as creating a non-profit foundation there that will donate to ocean-life organizations such as MoNRE, Vietnam's Ministry of Natural Resources and Environment.
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It's no secret that despite the incremental growth of social media posts on the topic of plastic’s detrimental impact on ocean life, plastic is still being thrown away carelessly into nature. I hope that through all efforts, both in raising awareness and taking an active step in combating the use of plastics, fishes and other ocean creatures will be able to swim freely again. I would encourage my 13 year-old self standing stock still on the sandy beaches of Da Nang to look over the plastic bags and waste, and to focus on the beauty of the glittering blue waves and remember the value of ocean life. I want myself and others to recognize the importance of nature’s beauty as inspiration for the change in our world that is necessary to ensure its permanence.


