Fishing for Plastic

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Pollution is typically something that we don’t associate with our own lives. We tend to shy away from it or even avoid the topic completely, thinking it isn’t our problem. We think, maybe someone else somewhere else is contributing, so I don’t really need to. Maybe it will be important for the next generation, but by that time it won’t affect me anymore. Maybe I could do something, but how could I even make a change, when I’m only one person? But how can we even begin to hope for a better future when we don’t even accept the problem that is right in front of our eyes? We shirk from these issues as a result of our instinctive horror at the stark reality that was brought upon by our own negligence, but maybe it is time for us to face our problems.

But what is this “stark reality”? Well, you can see our taint on nature everywhere, from the plastic bag caught on the branch of a tree to the thick, heavy smoke rising from a factory chimney. In my life, the biggest example of human pollution I am constantly reminded of is the East River in New York City. Every Saturday, I go jogging next to the East River, and all I can see are the green, murky waters and cans and bottles floating on the river’s surface. But this is only what meets the eye. Beneath the surface, there are meters of what is referred to as “black mayonnaise” – layers and layers of petroleum-based pollutants that are stuck to the bottom of the river. This “black mayonnaise” was first developed after numerous oil spills due to the mismanagement of oil refineries and storage tanks, and has remained there to this day for over 150 years (Pérez-peña, Richard). Additionally, every time it rains, the sewage and streetwater
from the sewers are dumped into the river, further contaminating the waters (“East River-Ferry Point Park”). And if that wasn't enough, many passerby will carelessly toss their litter on the ground, only for all that debris to get swept up by the river. Because of our thoughtless actions, the East River has become among the United State’s most polluted rivers (The Associated Press).

The East River is murky – so much so that you can’t even see the fish swimming beneath the waters. Any view you might have had is blocked by a thick layer of greenish grime that smothers the entire river. But you don’t need to dig too far underneath to see how our pollution has affected the wildlife in the water. After dying from suffocation from all the poisonous toxins in the water, many fish float up to the surface, their mouths gaping wide (“NYC Sewage Overflows Kill Thousands of Fish”). One of the species of fish whose populations have been especially affected by the abundance of toxic chemicals is the menhaden, which are exceptionally important to the marine life ecosystem. Menhaden are a key source of food for many of the fish in the East River, and the shortage of menhaden means that the whole ecosystem is out of balance (“NYC Sewage Overflows Kill Thousands of Fish”). But the dead fish are not the only victims of the damage we inflict. Even the fish that do not directly die from pollution are affected by it (Hamilton, Patrick B, et al.). The harmful chemicals and plastics within the river stay in the fish until they die or until they are eaten – by us.

One of my father’s favorite pastimes is fishing. During the summer, my father and I go fishing at parks in upstate New York or in New Jersey, but he always, always tells me I should never fish in the East River. He tells me stories of how he had fished there in the past, only to catch fish filled with muck and grime, dirtied from all the pollution in the river. One day, he tells
me of how his friend, who is also a fisher, tried his luck at the East River, and ended up catching a mutated fish with two heads. But his friend is far from the only one who relies on the East River as a source of fish. Many people, who are either struggling financially and cannot afford safer options, or simply do not understand the repercussions of consuming highly contaminated fish, choose to fish or buy fish caught from the East River (Pérez-peÑa, Richard). According to the New York Times, a study shows that in East Harlem centers, 1 in 10 people eat locally caught fish. But what they don’t understand is that the toxins in the water are transferred to the fish, which then find their way into our bodies. And the consequences much more severe than you might expect – eating polluted fish can cause cancer and even developmental disabilities! (“Marine Plastic Pollution,” IUCN). Our bodies can not take the toxicity of the chemicals, and neither can the fish we eat. By poisoning the world we live in, we are only poisoning ourselves.

Nevertheless, the East River remains a place of great marine life diversity. Many fish, including the American eel, black bass, and white perch call the East River their home (Diaz, Clarissa). Even though we have desecrated their natural habitat with our waste and litter, many species of fish still thrive in the East River. But this can not keep going on. Sooner or later, even the most resilient of fish will be severely affected by our reckless trashing of the river. The plastic that we carelessly throw into the river ends up being ingested by fish, resulting in infections, incapacity to swim, and even death by starvation (“Marine Plastic Pollution,” IUCN). If the population of even one species of fish starts to wane, all the rest will be affected due to the fragile structure of the ecosystem, causing a drastic effect on all the East River’s fish species. And when no fish can survive in the East River’s poisonous sludge, one day it will turn into an inhabitable, barren waste: an empty river without a single trace of life left.
No one wants that to happen. We all wish the best for the world that we live in, but sometimes just wishing won’t help. Something needs to change, and we need to be the ones who cause this change. In order to take initiative, we have to stop waiting around for other people to take action, because if all of us just keep waiting, pollution will only spread, causing the deaths of more and more fish. The first step to improving conditions in the East River is to change our own mindsets. We need to understand that even as individuals, just by being more mindful in our daily lives, we can inspire other people to do the same. As the world collectively becomes more heedful in our disposal of waste, not only the East River, but all the rivers around the world, will become a safe haven for a diverse multitude of fish. Being more mindful can mean remembering to pick up after ourselves, reducing the amount of plastic we expend, or even just sharing the importance of keeping the rivers clean with other people. In fact, the most important thing that we can do is to raise awareness for all the victims of pollution. Whether it’s on a post on social media, a written blog, or even just spreading the word in real life, all of us can work together to create a chain effect leading to a world without pollution ("Marine Plastic Pollution," IUCN). By spreading the word and making sure more people act in a sustainable fashion, our efforts will multiply in magnitude and our goal of purifying our rivers will reach fruition. We can all start to recycle the plastic and paper we use instead of littering, shop more sustainably, and choose to ride a bike or walk instead of taking a car. And these are just a few of the ways that we can create a world absent of pollution. Every little step counts when we are aiming for something as ambitious as restoring the world we live in. But it is my firm belief that if we all cooperate to build a better world, one day, pollution will become a figment of the past.
As I write, I envision this: I am jogging along the East River, the clear, blue waves shimmering in the sunlight. Droves of fish frolic in the river, spinning and twirling, as if they are dancing in joy. The crisp, clear air surrounds me, and I marvel at how far we’ve come, and how much more we can do to protect our world.
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