



## **Away *Where?* What To Do with All the Plastic?**

A Submission by the Green Technology Education Centre (GTEC)

There is no such thing as 'away'. When we throw anything away, it must go somewhere.

*Annie Leonard, Exec.Dir. Greenpeace USA, film maker.*

### **Plastic waste**

More than eight billion tons of plastic waste has been accumulated over the past 50 years. The majority (90%) of the world's plastic waste goes directly into landfills and 3% ends up in the oceans.

Plastics degrade very slowly (up to 450 years), while releasing toxic microplastics and chemicals into the landfills and oceans.

The largest market for plastics today is for packaging materials. Trash from packaging now accounts for nearly half of all plastic waste generated globally.

One trillion single-use plastic bags are used annually across the globe - nearly 2 million every minute.

Plastics are derived from organic materials such as cellulose, coal, natural gas, salt and crude oil. The production of plastics begins with the distillation of crude oil in an oil refinery.



## **A Shift of Responsibility**

In the face of the torrent of plastic waste that began in the 1950's and accumulates daily in landfills, rivers, lakes and oceans, incremental change is a losing game. A supply chain of producers from oil refineries through factories to retail outlets profit from the sale of a wide range of plastic materials and products. Then, when the plastic ducky splits or the plastic box containing pre-washed salad is emptied it becomes our responsibility. Sometimes these plastic items end up in a blue box as if they were going to be recycled, but end up in a landfill in Indonesia. Other times they go directly to the local landfill. Occasionally, they become part of a parking lot.

Recognizing the harm to the environment caused by plastic waste, governments have to think through how to deal with the tons of plastic waste that have accumulated over the years and the millions of tons piling up daily. From a policy point of view, the main point is that the problem has become governments' and their citizens' responsibility and not the producers and manufacturers who profit from the sales of plastic. In fact, the producers and manufacturers of plastic products often oppose government legislation and regulation in court and in the corridors of power using the wealth derived from their sales. Governments at all levels find themselves in the position of having to prove that specific plastic products are harmful enough to warrant regulation.

## **Returning Responsibility to Those Who Cause Harm**

Our core proposal is based on the principal that those who cause harm, inadvertently or otherwise, should be responsible for its consequences. Or, in the form of a more pragmatic corollary, those who are doing harm or propose to do harm through the sale of toxic substances should be required to demonstrate that the substances they sell provide sufficient social and economic value to offset the harm. More concretely, environmental regulations should be extended to require that any and all plastics available for sale in the province must address the



'balance of harm' test suggested above. This test includes disposal, recycling, research and health care costs. As of 2025, with exemptions for medical equipment, the proposed legislation suspends the sale of any and all plastics in use until their producers or importers have successfully addressed the balance of harm test in a submission to the province's expanded environmental regulatory body. The opening date for balance of harm submissions is January, 2022. Failure to address these requirements is a criminal offense because of the gravity of the harm entailed.

### **Current stores of plastic waste**

The policy proposal outlined above does not address the accumulation of plastic waste to date. Our proposal in this respect suggests substantial government financial support for the design and production of plastic based products that make use of current stores of plastic waste. Government policy should incorporate free access to landfills and 'recycling' supply chains.

An example of such innovation is the environmentally-friendly parking solution to be installed at Trent University's Symons Campus, created using 100% recycled plastic. It helps to curb plastic pollution as it does not require the use of asphalt - often a byproduct of the petroleum industry. Similar parking systems are being used across Europe, as well as countries around the world, in a variety of settings including agriculture, parks and industrial spaces.

The environmental impact of this specific project is significant and will utilize 35,640 pounds of recycled plastic, detain 64,627 gallons of storm water, and save 162.9 tons of CO<sup>2</sup>, the equivalent of planting 34,295 trees.



## **Mitigating systemic disadvantage and toxicity from existing plastic waste**

Government legislation should immediately mitigate two harms flowing from the sale of plastics in BC:

1. The systemic disadvantage all levels of governments face in responding to this issue. Attempting to effect incremental reductions in the sale of plastics puts lawmakers in the position of repeatedly proving harm in the face of organizations who are benefiting from being the sources of harm.
2. Toxicity flowing from the enormous quantities of plastics that already exist in landfills, in particular and in various ecosystems, in general.