

## Comment: We must change throw-away economy

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“We owed it to do, not what was to perish with ourselves, but what would remain, to be respected and preserved into other ages.”

— Thomas Jefferson

The world’s oceans are choking on plastic. This year up to 20 million tonnes of plastic bags, food wrappers, bottles, straws, Styrofoam, plastic fishing gear and other plastic products will cascade into the sea. A startling study in the Strait of Georgia has found more than 3,000 plastic micro-particles per cubic metre of water. Clearly the throw-away plastic economy must be fundamentally changed.

The good news is that British Columbians who love the coast can lead this global reform.

Every year, plastic trash kills countless fish, more than a million seabirds and 100,000 marine mammals. Sea turtles eat plastic bags, mistaking them for jellyfish. Six-pack rings strangle gulls and herons. Plastic bags entangle and drown seals and dolphins. Whales become entangled in plastic nets — or ingest so much plastic debris that their guts burst.

Worse still, plastic eventually breaks down into micro-particles that are now everywhere. An analysis of commercial sea salt from eight countries found plastic particles in all samples but one. One study estimates that returning B.C. salmon ingest up to 90 plastic particles a day — particles that might contain endocrine inhibitors and carcinogens.

And the problem will get much worse if we don’t act. With plastic production doubling every 20 years, Royal Society research estimates that by 2050, the oceans could contain more plastic than fish.

Furthermore, the current plastics economy is a colossal waste of petroleum. For example, every day Americans use — and immediately throw away — almost 500 million plastic straws. In fact, 95 per cent of all plastic value is lost after only a single use. Such waste drives climate change. At current trends, the plastics industry could consume 15 per cent of the world’s total carbon budget by 2050.

Clearly, we need to re-invent the world’s plastic economy. British Columbians can demand that governments:

- Ban the distribution of single-use plastic bags at supermarket checkouts — or tax it. California recently issued a ban; Ireland and Britain have reduced bag usage with taxes.
- Ban the sale of individual-sized bottled water, as did Concord, Massachusetts.
- Ban plastic straws, as did Manhattan Beach, California. Alternatives exist, for those who need straws.
- Ban non-biodegradable disposable plastic cups and tableware, as did France — and Styrofoam food ware, as did San Francisco.

But product bans are not enough. Because storm sewers drain trash off the urban landscape, storm water is a big source of marine plastics. Los Angeles now requires installation of storm drain screens, to catch plastics before they get to the sea. We

should do the same — and plastic producers should pay for it.

Lost plastic fishing lines, nets and traps are also deadly to wildlife. We need a national strategy to remove this “ghost fishing gear” that floats around, needlessly trapping and killing animals. We can learn from the Puget Sound initiative that recently cleaned up thousands of derelict fishing nets and crab pots — gear that killed almost 300,000 animals, including fish, porpoises, sea lions, birds and crabs.

We also need better rules for the ships and factories that lose plastic manufacturing pellets into the ocean — and for laundering of synthetic fleece clothing, which pollutes our waters with plastic fibres.

But most importantly, we need a radical re-design of the way we use plastics. Fortunately, groups such as the UN, the European Commission and the World Economic Forum recognize this urgent need. They are calling for a “new plastics economy” to:

- Replace petroleum inputs with benign materials.
- Systematically ensure re-use and recycling — with thoughtful cradle-to-grave product design.
- Stop the irrational level of plastic waste.

British Columbians can lead this reform. Everyone who has savoured fresh seafood; everyone who has explored tide pools and hermit crabs with kids; everyone who has watched a heron silently stalk fish in a shallow lagoon at dawn; everyone who has stood open-mouthed as orcas leapt out of Haro Strait — we all have a stake in this.

Concerned citizens should urge Premier John Horgan and Prime Minister Justin Trudeau to help create a New Plastics Economy.

We not only can save the ocean — we must. Our grandchildren’s right to a healthy ocean takes precedence over our right to consume and throw away.

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