A straw and a sea turtle: Why we should stop using single-use plastic

We’re working to end plastic pollution because the single-use plastic items people throw away every day have a real cost for the wildlife with which we share the planet. Here’s Michaela Morris, an associate with our national network’s Oceans program, on how a powerful video brought that cost home for her.

“Have you seen the video of a turtle with a straw in its nose?”

My coworker asked this question the day after I started work as an associate with Environment America. Before she mentioned the clip, I had neither seen nor heard of it. But over the next few weeks, I found references to that same video threaded through many conversations, email chains and articles about plastic pollution. Additional research confirmed: The video was a focal point for the public’s understanding of plastic pollution.

And so, finally, I plugged YouTube into my search bar and watched the turtle video.

‘Eight excruciating minutes’

I made it through less than two minutes of the eight-minute clip. I expected the video to be sad—an article I read in The Intercept described it as “eight excruciating minutes in which marine biologists yank at the plastic straw with pliers.” But I wasn’t prepared for the turtle’s clear emotional and physical distress that the video captures.

At first, the turtle wriggles and shakes as scientists poke and pull at the straw. Her nose begins to drip. She tenses a flipper and paws at the hands of the scientists. The straw still refuses to dislodge. Blood pours down her beak. She whimpers and cries.

“I’m sorry, little one,” one of the marine biologists murmurs. “But I think you’ll be more comfortable after.”

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Working to keep toxic PFAS out of our drinking water

As of this writing, Congress is on the verge of taking action on a set of toxic chemicals, used in everything from nonstick pans to firefighting foam, that have already contaminated drinking water in communities across the country.

Over the summer, both houses of Congress passed measures to address contamination from per- and polyfluoroalkyl substances (PFAS). Both would phase out the use of PFAS on military bases; the House version contains additional provisions to spur cleanup and reduce discharges into waterways. On Sept. 24, our national team joined U.S. Reps. Dan Kildee and Andy Levin (both of Michigan) in calling on Congress to get the strongest possible version of those measures across the finish line.

"Millions of people across the country turn on their tap and are met with toxic chemicals. This is Congress’ chance to step up and protect the public," said Bart Johnsen-Harris, director of our network’s No Toxics on Tap campaign.

Global Warming Solutions team stands against Pres. Trump’s latest climate rollback

As leaders and activists around the world debated how to respond to the climate crisis, our national network made the case for one of America’s best tools against global warming: strong Clean Car standards. On Sept. 18, President Trump announced his plan to block California and any other state from setting stronger auto emission standards than the federal government.

Morgan Folger, director of our national network’s Clean Car Communities campaign, laid out the case in an op-ed for CNN.com:

"Transportation is now the No. 1 source of global warming pollution in America," Morgan wrote. "Rather than stifling innovation at the state level, our federal government should give states an open road to continue taking bold action to reduce global warming pollution."

On Sept. 19, staff from our national research partner Environment America Research & Policy Center also rallied outside the Environmental Protection Agency headquarters in Washington, D.C., to show our objections. Environment America is challenging the action in court alongside eight other public interest groups.

Report highlights a decade of tremendous growth in wind and solar power

If you’ve noticed more solar panels, wind turbines and super-efficient LED lightbulbs in the past few years, you’re not alone.

According to the 2019 edition of “Renewables on the Rise,” a report by our national research partner Environment America Research & Policy Center, the country has witnessed a 40-fold increase in solar power and a threefold increase in wind power since 2009. The wind and the sun now provide enough electricity to power more than 35 million homes.

“Thanks to tremendous progress in the last decade, we now have 50 times more clean, renewable power than we had at the beginning of the century,” said Susan Rakov, chair of Environment America Research & Policy Center’s Clean Energy program.

In that same period, energy storage increased 18-fold, and energy saved through utility energy efficiency programs doubled.

"We need to seize the moment," said Rob Sargent, senior director of our national network’s 100% Renewable Energy campaign, "and lean into a future powered by clean renewable energy.”
Thank you for standing with us as we closed out 2019 with more progress toward the greener, healthier world we want to live in. Looking at all we’ve accomplished together, despite all the challenges we face, always gives me hope for the future of our movement.

So thank you once again for making it all possible with your action and support.

Celeste Meiffren-Swango
State Director

The camera keeps the turtle’s eyes—dark and big—in sharp focus throughout the entire video. She blinks them shut and shrugs away as the scientists dig for the straw. Eventually, her glassy eyes fill with pain and then glaze over. She looks despondent, exhausted and hurt.

The video provides visceral imagery of the suffering caused by single-use plastic. Marine animals, like this turtle, dive through the ocean, eat, and nurse their young. They do not deserve to suffer extraordinary pain because of the vast quantities of disposable plastic products that end up in the sea.

**Solutions within our reach**

We have alternatives. We can and must shift toward compostable and reusable options. And, fortunately, states, cities and companies are doing this by adopting policies that phase out single-use plastics.

In 2019, New York, Maine, Vermont, Connecticut, Oregon and Delaware all banned single-use plastic bags, joining California, which banned them in 2016. Maine also became the first state to ban single-use polystyrene foam containers, and Maryland became the second a month later. Our network’s staff helped win the laws in Maine, Connecticut, Oregon and Maryland—and very nearly won an even more comprehensive law in California. While the California Legislature failed to act on the bill this year, our team is ready to keep working in 2020 to get it over the finish line.

Across the country, more than 200 cities and communities have passed foam bans of their own, from San Francisco to Minneapolis to Baltimore.

Some companies are getting the message, too. In January 2018, McDonald’s made a commitment to phase out foam cups and containers worldwide and replace them with 100 percent recycled materials. Dunkin’ Donuts has pledged to do the same—which means an estimated 1 billion fewer foam cups will end up in the waste stream each year.

We need to keep pushing more states, cities and companies in this direction. The wide, innocent eyes of the sea turtle deliver a clear signal: We must choose wildlife over waste.

*By Michaela Morris, associate, Our Oceans program*

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*Learn more about our Wildlife Over Waste Campaign at https://environmentoregon.org/feature/ore/wildlife-over-waste*
More than 123,000 join the call to save the bees

Wherever you go, you’re likely to find people who have heard about the decline in bee populations and are willing to do something about it.

That was our experience this summer, as our national network sent canvassers across the country, where they knocked on doors, wrote letters, and met with lawmakers in support of restrictions on the class of pesticides called neonicotinoids (or neonicis), which are known to kill bees. Their message resonated. As of this writing, more than 123,000 people have sent messages to governors and state legislators calling for action.

“If we want to save the bees, one of the first things we need to do is stop using the pesticides that are killing them,” said Steve Blackledge, senior director of our national network’s Conservation program.

Decision-makers took notice, from Idaho, where the governor’s office requested a meeting with Steve, to Texas, where the state Parks and Wildlife Department agreed to stop using neonics in state parks.

Our network’s staff get ready for another day working to save the bees.