

Coalition: To help reduce plastic pollution, stop using straws

By Lynn R. Parks

The Delaware Plastic Pollution Action Coalition was formed in 2009 to advocate for legislation on the use of plastic shopping bags. That same year, the General Assembly passed a law requiring stores that have more than 7,000 square feet of retail space, or that have three or more stores with 3,000 square feet of retail space, to provide special containers where consumers can deposit plastic bags for recycling.

(Plastic bags are not permitted in Delaware's regular recycling stream.)

Despite that effort, plastic bag litter is still a concern. In the state's annual Coastal Cleanup, plastic bags are picked up more frequently than all other types of litter, except for cigarette butts.

This fall, the coalition is turning its attention to another source of plastic pollution: the straw. In No Straw November, it is asking Delaware's restaurants not to serve plastic straws automatically, and customers to tell servers that they don't want straws.

According to the Plastic Pollution Coalition, an international organization based in Berkeley, Calif., Americans use 180 billion straws every year. In just one typical day, people in the United States use and then discard enough straws that, if the straws were laid end to end, they would wrap around the Earth two and a half times.

Most of those straws end up in landfills. But a good portion of them end up just being discarded, and then make their way onto coasts and into waterways. In 2016, the last year for which statistics are available, volunteers with Delaware's Coastal Cleanup picked up 1,845 straws along the state's coastline.

Janis Markopoulos is owner of Delmarva Board Sport Adventures, which has a stand on the Rehoboth Bay on Dagsworthy Street in Dewey Beach. It is common for her to find discarded straws near the stand.

"After every storm [or] super high tide, we end up with scores of straws from the Dewey restaurants and bars on our beach concession," she said.

The problem goes beyond the unsightly mess that straws and other plastic pollution make. Sea mammals and turtles are harmed when they try to eat plastic garbage. In 2015, an olive ridley sea turtle was found off the coast of Costa Rica with a plastic straw stuck in its nose. Before scientists pulled the straw out, a procedure that was filmed and that is still available

on YouTube, the reptile was having trouble breathing.

(According to the International Union for Conservation of Nature, numbers of the olive ridley turtle have declined to the point that the species is vulnerable to extinction.)

"Personally, after seeing the video with the straw lodged up the poor sea turtle's nose, I am going to seek paper alternatives for myself and my family," Markopoulos said.

Another problem: Plastic does not biodegrade. Instead, it breaks apart into smaller and smaller pieces, which end up in the food chain.

In addition, the coalition says, toxic chemicals leach out of plastics and are ubiquitous: Even newborn babies have the chemicals in their systems.

The coalition doesn't want to do away with all plastics, said Dee Durham, co-founder and co-chairwoman of the

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Janis Markopoulos
Owner, Delmarva Board Sport Adventures
Dewey Beach

Delaware Plastic Pollution Action Coalition. "Plastics certainly have applications in our daily lives," she said.

Rather, it wants to reduce the number of plastic products that are used just once and then discarded.

The Delaware Plastic Pollution Action Coalition has posters and table cards for restaurant owners who are interested in participating in No Straw November.

"Straws are so prevalent; restaurants just put them in everything no matter what," Durham said. "But I think that not having them would be no problem at all for patrons. People get it, especially if someone takes time to explain it to them."

Lee Milkes is owner of three restaurants, in Newark, Bear and Kennett Square, Pa. Combined, the three eateries go through about one million straws each year. In July, a customer told him about the "Plastic Straws Suck" campaign being conducted by the Surfrider Foundation, which works to protect beaches and oceans. After doing some research, Milkes asked his staff to stop handing out straws automatically.

"When you're home, you never use a straw," Milkes told the Newark Post newspaper for an October story. "Why is this any different?"

For your information

The Delaware Plastic Pollution Action Coalition has materials for restaurant owners interested in participating in No Straw November. Volunteers with the citizens group will also talk to organizations about its efforts. For information, call Dee Durham at 302- 981-1950 or email her at deedurham@dca.net.



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