

Op-Ed | Linda Valente: Plastic – We can't recycle our way out of this crisis

by **Linda Valente**



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NEVADA COUNTY, Calif. October 1, 2020 – South Yuba River Citizens League (SYRCL) recently hosted an annual Yuba River Cleanup volunteer event. Happy to spend time outside after weeks of poor air quality, I jumped at the chance to participate by cleaning up near the popular Pioneer Trail off Highway 20 in Nevada City. However, I was surprised and disheartened at the quantity of trash I encountered, the majority of which was comprised of plastics of all shapes, sizes, and colors: several clear plastic cups, bits of hard auto plastic, a multitude of party-sized liquor bottles, and many plastic grocery bags, to name just some. Though these items were thrown “away” at some point, this material never really goes away. Experts estimate that plastic endures in the environment from 450 years to forever.

Plastics have been around for a long time; but Americans’ undying love affair with disposable single-use plastics probably began in the 1950’s, just on the heels of wartime rationing and thrift. Fast forward to today:

Plastic production has increased exponentially, from 2.3 million tons in 1950 to 448 million tons by 2015 and production is expected to double by 2050. Half of all plastics ever manufactured have been made in the last 15 years. More than 40 percent of plastic is used just once, then discarded. More than 5 trillion pieces of plastic are already floating in our oceans. By 2050, virtually every seabird species on the planet will be eating plastic.

Given the sobering reality of this situation, its repercussions for human health, and link to climate change, we are well beyond being able to adequately deal with the problem by “cleaning it up”. We can’t recycle our way out of this crisis. The plastics industry wants us to believe recycling is the answer, but only a small percentage of the plastics we use can effectively be recycled. We must employ a combination of strategies including recycling and reduction, while seeking new solutions. In the meantime, rather than succumb to hopelessness, each of us can help minimize demand by curbing our own use of plastics. The onus is upon us as the consumer to reduce our

consumption of plastic at every opportunity. We can vote with our dollars and apply public pressure to decision makers. Here are a few relatively simple strategies:

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We can bring our own reusable shopping bags to the store. It's allowed as long as we pack our own bags. We can buy loose produce and items from bulk bins using our own containers. We can choose restaurants that use more responsible packaging than plastic and polystyrene, when enjoying take-out. Let the restaurant know that packaging matters to you by asking ahead of time how they will package your order. Tell them why you are choosing to go elsewhere and ask if they have ever considered alternative packaging.

You might ask: What about spreading viruses through reused items? The plastics industry wants us to believe that single-use plastics are necessary for our health and safety. After all, plastics are the fossil fuel industry's plan B in light of waning demand for fossil fuels. However, in a recently released statement, more than 125 virologists, epidemiologists, and health experts from 18 different countries concluded that reusables are safe to use during the pandemic. The virus can live on plastic bags for up to 72 hours, but cloth has the advantage of being washable.

It may seem like an uphill battle, but if many of us speak up and make thoughtful decisions as consumers, (and vote!), we're bound to make a difference. Let's not cause undue stress for ourselves, but do the best we can. While we're at it we might even help maintain the natural beauty of our beloved local environment.

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