

State of the Planet



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SUSTAINABILITY

Waste in the World of COVID-19

BY KELLY ROSE NUNZIATA | JUNE 24, 2020

At the beginning of 2020, **eight states** and **dozens of cities** had banned single-use plastic bags. Environmental activists and proponents of a zero waste economy were finally gaining momentum as the cultural shift of carrying reusable bags, water bottles, and straws was reaching almost every corner of the nation. Unfortunately, COVID-19 brought a sudden and dramatic halt to this positive streak as fears of spreading the novel coronavirus took precedence over all other concerns.

Hospitals have seen a huge rise in the need for both personal protective equipment (PPE) and non-reusable medical equipment as the total confirmed number of coronavirus cases **approaches 9 million** globally. We also see this reflected outside of the healthcare system with essential workers, from public transit employees to sanitation workers, requiring medical-grade PPE and everyday individuals wearing masks and gloves simply to go grocery shopping. All of these single-use items get thrown away (or thrown into the street) and eventually make their way **into a landfill** — or as we have seen with the rest of the waste we generate, **into the ocean**.

The **additional waste** is not only masks and gloves, as countless single-use items are surging **back into** popularity. Take-out and delivery orders from restaurants, which come in Styrofoam or plastic containers, are the only options now that restaurants cannot seat customers. **Starbucks and Dunkin Donuts** will not allow customers to bring in their reusable cups, and **Target and Trader Joes** have joined other stores in prohibiting reusable bags. Progress has been



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most urgently stopped at the municipal level, with states and cities that had banned single-use plastic bags **rolling back the legislation** to allow their use once again.

Many of these behavioral changes are necessary — the health of the global population is understandably the first priority. But some of these changes have been brought on not by necessity, but by the powerful plastics lobby taking advantage of a time of crisis. In March, the Plastic Industry Association **sent a letter to** Health and Human Services Secretary Alex Azar calling for a federal-level pushback against plastic bag bans under the guise of human health, despite no evidence at the time that plastic was safer than other surfaces. A month later, **studies concluded** that plastic could carry the virus at the same level as any other surface, but stores and cities are still encouraging the use of single-use plastic bags **over reusable options**.

The plastic industry's lobbying is even more effective as oil prices have **tanked in recent months**. These cheap oil prices have dramatically **cut the cost of producing virgin plastic** (made from fossil fuels) to well below the cost of utilizing recycled plastic. Globally, we have seen Asian recycled plastic suppliers **lose orders overnight** as major companies begin switching back to the cheaper, more polluting material. Despite many companies making promises about utilizing recycled plastic, the plastics industry has successfully argued that the cheaper virgin material is the right choice for right now.

Six months ago, single-use plastics were the enemy of almost everyone. Companies were shifting toward recycled materials and encouraging reusable options, everyone had a reusable water bottle and a metal straw, and saving the sea turtles was a rallying cry the entire political spectrum seemed to be able to agree on. Now, as single-use PPE becomes standard across many occupations and people are discouraged from utilizing reusables, we are seeing the world take a step back on the small environmental achievements we were making. Moving forward, how can we balance the need to protect human health while working toward a more sustainable world?

We need to begin by ensuring the burden is placed on those responsible for so much of the waste plaguing the natural world. Companies need to feel the pressure to ensure they are utilizing recycled materials and reusable options not only when it is cheapest for them to do so, but at every opportunity. Individuals have been convinced that this is a problem for them to solve, when really this is an issue for those in power to tackle. The COVID-19 crisis has exposed so much of the structural inequality this world is built upon, but it presents a new opportunity to rebuild a world that works for everyone. This includes building sustainability and zero waste into **our** societal systems to ensure that the waste we generate is not only kept out of the ocean, but that it does not need to be thrown away in the first place.

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If you're interested in learning more about the MPA-ESP program, please contact the assistant director, Stephanie Hoyt (sah2239@columbia.edu), or join us at one of our upcoming online information sessions. [Register here.](#)

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