

2018 International Essay Contest for Young People

[Youth Category – 2nd Prize]

The Battle Against Plastic Pollution

(Original)

Kate Yeo

(Age 16, Singapore)

Plastic is amazing, because it's cheap and durable.

Plastic is terrible, because it's cheap and durable.

In fact, plastic is so durable that it can take up to 1000 years to decompose.

The past decade has seen plastic production escalate at breakneck speed. Termed a 'miracle material', plastic is easily one of the most wondrous and commonly-used inventions of all time – it's cheap, lightweight, durable, and easy to make. Today, single-use plastics have become a daily necessity in our lives, from plastic drinking bottles to coffee stirrers, and are virtually everywhere.

Unfortunately, this has led to one of the greatest environment scourges of our time. Our land and oceans are now under assault — treated as dumping grounds, collecting pools of plastic waste as a result of our ignorance and laziness. Plastic also presents an entire host of other issues – it clogs drainage systems, resulting in floods and increased rates of vector-borne diseases; it chokes and poisons hapless marine life who mistake it for food; it stealthily leaches into our food and drinks, damaging our health. All these consequences, for mere minutes of convenience. Yet only 9% of plastic we've ever produced has been recycled. At current rates, by 2050, there will be over 12 billion tonnes of plastic waste in landfills, and more plastic than fish in our oceans. Plastic pollution is no longer just a looming catastrophe; it's happening now, and it's a battle we have to win.

The problem doesn't lie in plastic itself. It's how we use it that makes a difference. Therefore, the change I want to make is to reduce the consumption of single-use plastics in my society.

A fundamental aspect of this issue is public awareness – to re-shape consumers' mindsets towards plastic, and create a culture of minimal waste in Singapore. This is why I decided to try to start a "BYO (Bring Your Own) Bottle Singapore" movement, encouraging consumers to bring their own reusable cups or bottles whenever they purchase drinks for take-away. The @byobottlesg Instagram page started off receiving a daily average of 5 new

followers – it may not seem like much for now, but that could mean twenty fewer plastic bottles in the ocean each week, and it's just starting.

Of course, it's not just consumers who contribute to this problem. It is also essential to engage all the other stakeholders – from retailers, to industry representatives, to the government. Thus I emailed over 50 F&B businesses with a range of ambitious, but important requests: to support the BYO movement, or change their automatic straw policies, or even ditch plastic straws entirely. As a 16 year-old student, it was daunting trying to reach out to these organisations, but thankfully the sheer determination paid off. Some agreed to consider and implement my suggestions. It just goes to show how far a little initiative and courage can go in making a difference!

Going forward, I hope to reach out to more F&B outlets to support the BYO Bottle movement, for instance by offering consumers small incentives. At the same time, I believe peer influence is another powerful means to catalyse change. By setting an example for my peers to follow, such as by rejecting plastic straws when we dine together, I believe I can help to reduce plastic waste consumption in Singapore.

The plastic crisis wasn't created overnight, and it certainly won't be resolved in a day. However, it's vital we understand how our plastic consumption all adds up – just one plastic straw a day, or a cup of coffee every morning, has immense consequences, to the extent that it can form a massive oceanic gyre of trash three times the size of France. In the same way, it's the little, every day actions that will make a difference in our battle against plastic pollution.

That is the change I want to make. For people to see that the Earth is not ours to exploit; that we must stop taking nature for granted; that we have the power to win this battle. It's no longer a matter of "we can" – it's that we must.