



FACTS ABOUT SINGLE USE PLASTIC STRAWS



**forestry, fisheries
& the environment**

Department:
Forestry, Fisheries and the Environment
REPUBLIC OF SOUTH AFRICA



1. DRINKING PLASTIC STRAWS ARE SINGLE USE PLASTIC PRODUCTS

1.1 THE REALITY AND FACTS ABOUT SINGLE USE PLASTIC STRAWS



Figure 1: Single use plastic straws for drinking. (Source: Unknown)

Drinking straws are so convenient to all of us. Straws are making it easy and comfortable for us to consume our favourite beverage drinks in all the times. Sipping your favourite milkshakes or a cocktail drink has never been much easier and enjoyable without a straw. Most straws are easily accessible in restaurants, retail and take away shops. In many instances, straws are issued out for free to consumers. In some instances, there is no limit on how many straws that one can take, they are displayed for everyone to pick up for free. Sometimes, straws are issued out upon requests from consumers themselves. While some consumers insist on having a straw when buying a drink, some find it easy to drink without a straw.

However, in as much as we appreciate the convenience that is associated with straws, most straws that are found in markets in South Africa are fossil-fuel based plastic straws. They are categorised as single use plastics. Single use plastics, including fossil-fuel based plastic straws, are increasingly recognised as a threat to the environment. In South Africa, the vast majority of waste on beaches is plastic (94%), with 77% of it being single-use. Single-use plastic is especially problematic, because much of it cannot be recycled. It is highly prone to littering and being spread around the environment by wind. Even though this small straw may not seem like a lot at first, when its usage is added up, plastic straws create a big problem for the environment. It can take up to 200 years for plastic straws to decompose. In the past few years, South Africa was ranked as the world's 11th worst offender when it comes to releasing plastic wastes into the sea. This includes plastic straws.



Figure 2: Drinking single use plastic straw dumped in the environment (Source: unknown)

2019 ICC



Figure 3: The top ten collected items in South Africa include single use plastic straws (Source: ICC report 2019)

The main concern about fossil-fuel based single use plastics, such as drinking straws, is that once they leak into the environment, they find their way into illegal dumping sites, water bodies and ultimately into the ocean. Concerns around marine litter pollution are around the leakage of single use plastics that take years to degrade and affect human health and marine life ecosystems. Straws form one of the significant amounts of debris that is removed from the ocean during major beach clean-up activities in South Africa. Plastic straws are among the most ubiquitous litter items on South African beaches. East London's Eastern Beach has an average of 44 straws per metre of beach, despite being cleaned daily.

- The accumulation of fossil fuel based plastics, and plastic straws in the marine environment is fast becoming a growing and serious global concern. Their negative impacts on recreation, marine ecosystems and tourism are becoming evident in many parts of the world.
- Plastic straws find their way into the ocean, they can be easily ingested by marine animals and seabirds, which can lead to the death of these animals.
- High concentrations of plastic materials are linked to the blocking of breathing passages and stomachs of hundreds of different species in the rivers and oceans. There is considerable information on litter ingestion by marine organisms of South Africa with some species containing high levels of ingested debris.
- Although there is ongoing debate about the severity of impacts on birds from ingesting debris, levels of ingestion in some species are among the highest recorded for any birds, and thus cause for concern.
- Over 1 million birds are killed by plastic every year - many by drinking straws.
- Litter ingestion is also a significant problem for many marine turtles, all of which are listed as threatened.
- The presence of micro plastics in food could potentially increase direct exposure of plastic-associated chemicals to humans and may present an attributable risk to human health.



Figure 4: Illustration of how single use plastic straws can be consumed by animals (Source: Greenpeace)

ADDITIONAL FACTS!

- Globally, more than 1 000 000 000 single-use plastic straws are used and thrown out daily.
- Straws do not biodegrade. There is no natural process that destroys plastic - even after hundreds of years in the sun, it just breaks up into small pieces. It's still plastic, and plastic lasts forever.
- There are more than 18 000 pieces of plastic in every square kilometre of ocean.
- Straws are not recycled. They are made of #5 polypropylene and despite the "recycling" logo, they are not recycled anywhere.
- The 2017 International Coastal Clean-up picked up enough straws to make a line 145 times taller than the One World Trade Centre.
- Drinking straws, like all other plastic, are made from crude oil - plastic uses 8% of the world's oil resources, so it contributes to global climate change.



Figure 5: Single use plastic straws collected from the environment (Source: Two Ocean Aquarium)

2. PRACTICAL GUIDE TO MANAGE SINGLE USE, FOSSIL-FUEL BASED PLASTIC STRAWS

2.1 DISTRIBUTION OF SINGLE USE PLASTIC STRAWS BY RETAILORS

- Over the past few years, South Africa has witnessed a large number of retail shops taking action against plastic straws. Most retailers have started a drive to promote consumer awareness on the dangers of using plastic straws. There is a noticeable number of retailers that have stopped to dish out plastic straws to consumers. Equally, there is a growing number of consumers that are no longer using plastic straws and are helping discourage their use.
- It is therefore important that retailers should start preparing for alternative straws that are more environmental friendly. It is the responsibility of suppliers and retailers to make sure that they understand the quality of plastic straws that are being produced and distributed in the markets with respect to their impact on the environment.
- Retailers are encouraged to develop consumer awareness plans to encourage less use of plastic straws.
- Retailers should explore the use of alternatives, more environmentally friendly straws. The convenience of using alternatives should also be explored and clearly communicated to consumers.
- The alternative straws that are entering the South African markets include; paper straws, wheat straws, bamboo straws, pastor straws, and stainless steel straws.
- More and more retailers should discourage the use of plastic straws altogether.



Figure 6: Paper straws can be used as an alternative to single use plastic straws(Source: Unknown)

2.2 USE OF SINGLE USE PLASTIC STRAWS IN RESTAURANTS AND HOTELS

- A number of hotel chains and restaurants are taking action to discourage the use of plastic straws in South Africa.
- Most restaurants and hotels have trained their staff to explain or discourage customers from using plastic straws.
- Staff members should always be encouraged to ask the customer if they require plastic straws, instead of automatically giving it.
- The message can be placed on the menu, counter, tables, walls, window, website, or social media to explain the changes. For example the message may say **"plastic straws are dangerous to the environment, please dispose to the bin after use"** to discourage customers from using plastic straws. Any other messages can be displayed to discourage and to make customers aware of the effect of plastic straws in the environment.
- If possible briefly remind the customers about the impact of plastic straws in the environment and the importance of disposing it into the bin or not to use it.
- Managers have responsibility to teach their staff to understand that the presence of plastic litter will damage the business reputation.
- Staff are very important since they represent their employer and that they are at the forefront of a great guest experience,
- The staff must be involved in plastic waste reduction and must be trained to be real ambassadors for sustainability.
- Staff must only give what is needed, when it's needed, for the right number of people.
- Never double the plastic straw for customers to take home.
- It is important to be aware of some product that have misleading labelling i.e. Biodegradable, Oxo-degradable, degradable, and decomposable.

- Bioplastic is a term that can cause confusion, as it can describe two types of plastic (Bio-based plastic and Biodegradable plastics).
- Serve reusable or paper straws only upon request.
- In terms of introducing the alternative to plastic straws, hotels and restaurants must start consulting with their suppliers regarding the type of straws they offer.
- It is also important to research local supplier who offer environmental friendly items.
- The supplier should be encouraged to start making alternatives to plastic straws.
- Even if businesses seem to be producing little waste, it is important to have bins placed inside and outside or near the door for customers who will be carrying straws on their way out.



Figure 7: Stainless still and glass straws as an alternatives to single Use plastic straws (Source: Ecowarrior)

2.3 RESPONSIBILITY OF CONSUMERS

- It is the responsibility of all citizen to take steps to eliminating the distribution and the use of plastic straws that are a threat to the environment.
- Investment in continuous education and awareness must be encouraged and supported.

It is critical that the following are considered before making use of single use plastic straws;

- When you buy a drink, do not ask for a straw
- Normalize refusing to use plastic straws even when offered
- When you buy a drink insist on environmental friendly straws such as paper straws, wood, glass straw etc.
- Teach your family members/kids to refrain from using plastic straws
- If you use straw, dispose it in a bin (plastic recyclable bin)

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