The ban on straws is useless and doesn't help the environment

Individual efforts can only go so far when corporate giants are responsible for most environmental destruction

Efforts to reduce the use of single-use plastics such as straws have been going on for some time, but a gruesome video of a turtle with a straw stuck in its snout showed first-hand the supposedly devastating effects of single-use plastics on the environment. Since then, there has been a widespread effort to change consumer behavior regarding single-use plastic straws, with the state of California banning restaurants from offering consumers straws starting in 2019.

However, banning single-use straws is useless because the plastic waste problem in the oceans can be attributed to other major factors instead of people sipping their iced mochas with straws.

ENVIRONMENTAL DESTRUCTION CAUSED BY BUSINESS ACTIVITY

Fast-Moving Consumer Goods (FMCG) companies mass-produce products at the lowest cost possible to maximize profit margins. Often, their products are in single-use plastic. However, according to the Institute of Development Studies, these FMCG companies do not collect or sustainably manage the waste generated from their packaging. As a result, various communities are left to deal with the leftover plastic waste, and not many are well-equipped to deal with plastic disposal. Therefore, instead of banning straws, a better way to help tackle the problem of plastic waste would be for these FMCG companies to change the way they package and sell products, using environmentally friendly materials such as bio-degradable plastics in their products so that the packaging will degrade instead of accumulating in the oceans.

IMPROPER AND POORLY MANAGED WASTE MANAGEMENT

Approximately 2 billion people across the globe live in areas without waste collection, while 3 billion people have improper waste disposal, according to the Earth Day Network. This means that there are no proper channels for them to dispose of their waste, and

a lot of this waste ends up floating into the oceans. Even for societies with waste collection facilities, a lot of waste ends up in landfill or in incinerators, each with their own hazardous consequences. According to Marine Litter Solutions, a bulk of marine litter is caused by poorly managed landfill sites, combined sewer overflows and illegal or inappropriate dumping of domestic and industrial waste. Hence, a better way to deal with the plastic waste problem in the oceans is to invest in proper waste disposal systems across the globe, to ensure that waste is funneled into the correct streams instead of being dumped in the ocean. Companies that illegally dump waste into water bodies should also be taken to task to set an example and ensure deterrence.

STRAWS ARE ONLY A TINY PART OF THE PROBLEM

The video of the turtle with the straw in its snout made waves as it shocked users with the visual impact of straws floating about in the oceans and causing harm to the animals. However, according to researchers from Stanford University, plastic straws are less than 1 percent of the overall problem of plastic waste in the oceans. Banning straws is a good first step to shifting away from single-use plastic, but it runs the risk of allowing companies and their customers to feel good about having done their parts for the environment without actually having much impact on the waste problem. Instead, what we should do is increase recycling rates and stem the tide of plastic, which begins with the manufacturers.

In conclusion, the banning of single-use plastic straws really has little impact on the plastic waste problem when we take into account the big picture of the waste problem and its various causes. If we truly want to do our part, we need to amplify our voices as conscious consumers who want better from the companies we patronize and put pressure on the companies to change the materials that they use. We also need to push for investments in waste disposal facilities across the world and ensure our waterways stay pollution-free.

Contact Clarissa Eyu at ceyu@usc.edu