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[Home](#)
[News](#)
[Sports](#)
[Real Estate](#)
[Lifestyle](#)
[Columns](#)
[Community](#)
[Classifieds](#)

[Weather](#)

Plastic never really goes away



By *Jenny Blaker and Stuart Moody* May 3, 2012 11:57 am

On Cotati Creek Critters Trash Pick Up days, volunteers have been astonished and disgusted by the amount of garbage that finds its way into our waterways. Much of it is found at the storm drain outlets, clear evidence it's being washed off the land, off streets and parking lots, backyards and schoolyards into the creeks. And much of it is plastic.

In April, Cotati Creek Critters hosted an event with Stuart Moody of Green Sangha's Rethinking Plastics Campaign on the wonders of, and problems with, plastics. Since 2006, the campaign has inspired zero waste practices in schools and businesses, saving tons of plastic from the landfill every year, and contributing to several waste reduction ordinances in Marin County.

Plastics are everywhere. Take a look around your house, office, or grocery store. They cover our food, clothe our bodies, they're in our computers, our gardens, our office supplies, in the ocean and even in our bodies. In 2010, the annual amount of plastic produced in the USA was about 50 million tons - roughly twice the weight of every man, woman, and child in the nation. In the same year, Americans threw away more than half that amount of plastic, not recycled.

Plastic never really goes away. Though plastic products may chip, break, shatter and tear, dispersing into tiny pieces, those pieces are not biodegradable. Almost all the plastic that has ever been made still exists. Over 180 pounds of plastic per person per year goes to landfill.

According to the EPA, only 7 percent of our total plastic waste gets recycled - and even that is a misnomer. For example, many communities that recycle will accept only no. 1 and no. 2 plastics, which cannot be made back into their original product.

Water bottles (no. 1 plastic) are made into articles such as shampoo bottles, polar fleece, and carpeting. No. 2 plastics can be made into plastic "lumber" and items such as traffic cones. These become trash when the structure or object is damaged or destroyed. In contrast to aluminum, glass or paper recycling, plastic recycling is really just "down-cycling," a step on the way to landfill.

Much of the plastic that gets discarded or blows away on the land finds its way into the oceans, where it breaks down into tiny, tiny pieces. Here are the phytoplankton and zooplankton, tiny aquatic plants and animals, which form the basis of the marine food chain. In 2001, a surface trawl of the Central Pacific Gyre between San Francisco and Hawaii found six pounds of plastic particles for every pound of zooplankton. A subsequent trawl in 2008 found the ratio at 46:1.

This growing accumulation of debris is lethal. Millions of seabirds and fish, and tens of thousands of animals including whales and turtles, mistake plastic debris for food, and are found with their carcasses full of plastic bottle tops, plastic bags, and other bits of plastic debris, or get tangled up in it and are drowned or suffocated.

Plastics attract fatty substances, including other petrochemicals. Plastic fragments in the ocean can collect highly toxic chemicals at a concentration up to one million times greater than in the ambient sea water. In a process called bio-accumulation, creatures that consume plastic concentrate these toxins in ever greater amounts up the food chain.

Plastic chemicals are found in the bloodstream of about 95 percent of Americans. Phthalates, used to provide softness or pliability for plastic items, break down under the action of heat, light, or mechanical stresses, and migrate into the air or water or whatever substances they are next to, including water bottles and toys. Every plastic item that wears down leaves a trail of plastic particles that get lifted by the breeze into the air all creatures breathe.

In humans, plastic exposure has been associated with cancer, asthma, and diabetes. High concentrations of phthalates correlate with higher risk of endocrine disruption leading to premature delivery, early onset of puberty, and other reproductive disorders. Bisphenol-A, used in polycarbonate items such as five-gallon water bottles, as well as lining most food cans, is also a known endocrine disruptor associated with cancer, diabetes and obesity. So what can we do?

At the April event, "Green Mary" spoke about her successful 10-year old business which "greens" conferences, fairs and festivals, and other events, with the aim of creating zero waste. She showed us how little waste we really need to create if we shop consciously, minimizing unnecessary packaging, using "real" plates and silverware instead of throw-aways, scrupulously composting everything that can be composted, recycling

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everything else, and minimizing the use of plastic. After a meal for 300 people I once attended, Green Mary held up three foil-lined tea bag sachets and said, "This is all the waste we created at this event!" So it can be done.

Sachiko Knappman of Mottainai Sonoma then described and demonstrated "furoshiki," a Japanese method of creating a wide variety of containers of all sorts from lunch boxes to baby carriers to shopping bags to gift wrap, using simple squares of cloth tied in specific ways. This way, your piece of cloth can have many uses and be used over and over again in different ways, lasting for years.

Everyone can do something, however large or small, from minimizing the amount of plastic you bring into your own home, to supporting the proposed county-wide ban on plastic bags. It's a great way to start, and if we all take these actions, we will save untold suffering across the planet.

Jenny Blaker is Outreach Coordinator of Cotati Creek Critters. Stuart Moody is Board President of Green Sangha and initiated the Rethinking Plastics campaign in 2005.



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