

For Whales' Sake
By Jackie Hilderling

Death by Plastic

If I ever get arrested, it will have to do with plastics. It won't be in a rational moment but I fear that if I ever "snap" it will be due to our disconnection between the frivolous use of plastics and the colossal repercussions to the environment.

Mainstream media generally keeps us ignorant of these repercussions so that the consumer machine keeps feeding the powers that be. This can be the only explanation for why the concentration of plastics in "the North Pacific Gyre" is not known to all.

The Gyre is where ocean currents concentrate marine debris from around the world. Two massive "garbage patches" result; one floats between Hawaii and California and the other between Hawaii and Japan. The area and density of these should hugely motivate us to avoid plastics. They are up to twice the size of Texas with concentrations of up to 6 times more plastic than plankton.

Charles Moore, ocean researcher, encountered them in 1997 when returning to California from a sailing race. He relates, "As I gazed from the deck at the surface of what ought to have been a pristine ocean, I was confronted, as far as the eye could see, with the sight of plastic. It seemed unbelievable, but I never found a clear spot. In the week it took to cross the subtropical high, no matter what time of day I looked, plastic debris was floating everywhere: bottles, bottle caps, wrappers, fragments."

Of course, the problem is not an issue of aesthetics nor only of causing entanglement and digestion issues for marine organisms. Plastics photo-degrade; breaking into smaller and smaller pieces. These bits act as sponges for the most toxic of chemicals such as PCBs and DDT. They get ingested and become part of the marine food web to which we belong.

The size of the garbage patches is ever increasing. Annually some 113 billion kilograms of plastic pellets are produced to make more disposable products while only about 5% of plastics get recycled.

The grand tragedy, which may cause me to snap, is how easy the solution is. Every plastic bag you don't use makes a difference. Avoid disposable goods, reduce consumption, recycle what remains, choose

for biodegradable and you're helping reduce this and other environmental problems. As a minor byproduct, you're also helping keep me out of jail.

For whale and conservation related information, see www.earthlingenterprises.ca .

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