



## Your Guide to Navigating the Anti-Plastic Straw Movement

By Chloe Bryan, Mashable, Jul. 18, 2018

At last, the great straw reckoning is upon us.

Last week, Starbucks announced it would phase out plastic straws by 2020, replacing them with a plastic lid that resembles the top of a sippy cup. Numerous cities across the U.S., including Seattle, Oakland, Malibu, and Miami Beach, have already banned single-use plastic straws. In New York City, a councilman has introduced legislation to ban straws there, too. And celebrities like Adrian Grenier, who co-founded the Lonely Whale Foundation, have been on the #StopSucking grind for years.

But how effective is a straw ban, really? When we ban plastic straws wholesale, who do we exclude? And how are we supposed to ... drink stuff? Here's what you need to know.



Photo: Horia Varlan

### Why are people giving up straws?

You've probably seen that sad viral video of a sea turtle with a straw stuck up its nose. The issue of plastic in our oceans is a real one — according to one oft-cited study, Americans use over 500 million single-use plastic straws every day. Most of these straws end up in the oceans, where they kill wildlife, disrupt ecosystems, and break down into tiny pieces called "microplastics." They never break down completely. When people give up straws or advocate for straw bans, they're basically trying to keep plastic out of the ocean. A noble cause!

### What straw alternatives are there?

Luckily, there are quite a few choices that will work for many people, each with a unique set of pros and cons.

**Stainless steel straws:** These are a strong option if you want to start carrying a set of Purse Straws. Keep them in a pencil pouch and pop them in the dishwasher when they're dirty. (If you don't have a dishwasher, a pipe cleaner will work.) Though they're obviously not the best for drinking hot drinks because the metal gets hot, too. Guard your lips.

**Paper straws:** Disposable paper straws won't help you generate less waste, just a different kind of waste. They also taste really bad. Not the best.

**Silicone straws:** A company called Koffie Straw makes these guys, which are composed of biodegradable silicone. (In fact, they'll burn down into ash when you're ready to get rid of them.) Reviewers on Amazon are big fans: "I love the fact that [the straw] comes with a cleaning brush and are easy to clean," one user wrote. "The straws are sturdy and tolerate the heat of coffee." "I like the slow sipping and the fact that I don't constantly burn my tongue now," said another reviewer. Seems good!



No straw at all: It's possible for many people to forgo straws entirely, of course, and consume beverages out of ... just a cup. If you're a lipstick wearer, though, this may strike fear into your heart. That's where a long-lasting lipstick can come in — we've heard NYX Matte Lipstick and Revlon ColorStay Ultimate Liquid Lipstick are both strong options.

### **Okay, so what's the downside to a straw ban?**

The downside is actually a huge one. As the anti-straw movement picks up momentum, disability rights advocates are pointing out that a full straw ban would make life substantially more difficult for some people with disabilities.

"Many people with physical disabilities such as cerebral palsy and multiple sclerosis require the use of plastic straws in order to hydrate," representatives from Disability Rights Washington wrote in the wake of Seattle's straw ban. "Other types of straws simply do not offer the combination of strength, flexibility, and safety that plastic straws do. Metal straws become hot or cold and offer a risk of injury."

In addition, paper straws can soften and disintegrate quickly, posing a choking hazard for those who take longer to finish a beverage.

So what do we do? Instead of putting the impetus on the disabled community to provide their own straws, activists suggest making single-use plastic straws available at coffee shops and restaurants upon request. It does seem like a no-brainer as far as inclusivity is concerned.

### **Is not using straws actually going to work?**

Here's where it gets a little more complicated. Yes, if people use fewer plastic straws, the amount of plastic in the ocean will likely decrease. And if even one sea turtle avoids getting a straw stuck up its nose, that's a good thing — especially considering humans use the average plastic straw for a total of only 20 minutes.

However, the plastic straw is not the primary reason oceans are so contaminated. According to a study published in the journal *Scientific Reports*, 46% of the mass of plastic in the Great Pacific Garbage Patch — "a major ocean plastic accumulation zone formed in subtropical waters between California and Hawaii" — is actually commercial fishing nets. Microplastics, on the other hand, make up 94% of the pieces of plastic in the area, but only 8% of the total mass.

Giving up straws alone, then, will not make a huge difference. To create bigger change in the oceans, we'll have to dive deeper — like holding commercial fisheries accountable for what they catch, for example. But that doesn't necessarily mean you should go full defeatist. You should simply be aware that by giving up straws, you will not single-handedly save the world's marine life.

"Banning straws is about as important as spitting in the wind," psychologist Robert Gifford told *Grist* reporter Shannon Osaka earlier this month for a piece on Seattle's straw ban. "But a lot of social psychology research says that if you get people to say yes to a small request, they are more likely to accede to more serious requests." Like, for example, pressuring the government to enact policy change!