

**PLASTIC FREE JULY?
LET'S WORK TOWARDS A LITTER FREE WORLD INSTEAD**

By Anton Hanekom, Executive Director of Plastics SA

Each year in July, people across the globe take part in “*Plastic Free July*” – an international movement that aims to reduce the amount of plastic waste in our environment by encouraging fellow citizens to make the shift towards long-term, environmentally friendly habits. Although sceptics might find it hard to believe, the plastics industry around the world supports these objectives. Whilst we don’t endorse the call for people to go “plastic free”, we do support the appeal for a plastics-free environment. To this end, we are advocating for a science-based, complementary plastic strategy that seeks to eradicate unnecessary plastic and considers the overall environmental impact of various plastic alternatives.

To imagine that the solution to our country’s waste crisis is as easy as simply banning the use of plastics, is an uninformed, irrational argument that can be perilous to the environment that we are trying to protect. It is important to recognise that the waste clogging our rivers, streams and oceans is not solely caused by plastics. Because plastics is a lightweight material, it floats and is therefore often the more visible pollutant. This has caused the plastics industry to have a big target on its back.

It is a fact that our modern lives would be virtually impossible without the use of plastics. Almost every sector or industry relies on plastics to make life easier, safer and more convenient. Plastics give us reliable performance at an affordable price. Think about the many applications of plastics in the healthcare environment, automotive industry, technology, building and construction and mining. More and more of the plastics used in these sectors are either recyclable, or are being manufactured with a percentage of recycled plastic contents as product designers and developers are grasping the tremendous benefits and savings afforded to them by supporting the circular economy.

Over the past few years, numerous independent scientific studies been conducted to compare the environmental footprint of plastics versus other packaging materials, e.g. glass, paper or biodegradable packaging. Time and again, these life cycle analyses have proven that plastics require less energy, reduce waste and have lower carbon emissions.

Earlier this year the World Economic Forum admitted that, “in trying to solve the plastic pollution problem, we may have created another problem: we are replacing plastic with materials that have a carbon footprint up to 3 times higher than plastics themselves, some of which are not even biodegradable in real-life conditions¹”. In 2020 the CSIR released their findings that confirmed that reusable, plastic shopping bags are the best option for South Africa². After comparing 21 environmental and socio-economic indicators, including water use, land use, global warming, the impacts of pollution, impact on employment and the affordability for consumers, they confirmed that locally produced plastic shopping bags have the lowest environmental footprint compared to carrier bags made from alternative materials, or even biodegradable bags - provided that they are re-used.

This confirmed similar findings released by Danish researchers who found that cotton bags need to be re-used 7,100 times to have the same cumulative environmental impact as using classic plastic bags³. Life Cycle Assessments showed that the single-use plastic straw has nearly half the energy demand of PLA and paper straws. The latter also have a global warming potential nearly three times more than the single-use plastic straw!

more 2/...

¹ <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2022/03/are-we-replacing-plastic-with-more-energy-intensive-alternatives/>

² <https://www.csir.co.za/reusable-shopping-bags-lower-environmental-impact>

³ <https://mybroadband.co.za/news/science/311379-an-inconvenient-truth-banning-plastic-bags-may-do-more-harm-than-good.html>

As mentioned earlier, plastics are essential to achieving a low carbon future and the Sustainability Development Goals (SDG). Thanks to the use of plastics, cars are being light weighted and buildings insulated – thereby reducing energy use and greenhouse gas emissions. Some of society’s biggest challenges are being addressed with the help of plastics - including improving medical outcomes, access to fresh and healthy foods, hygiene and sanitation, modern communication, transportation systems, infrastructure and employment.

Unfortunately, all of these benefits are jeopardized if plastic waste pollutes our environment. The real issue that should therefore be addressed is not the use of plastics, but human behaviour and the country’s broken waste collection and recycling systems. A few days ago, Stats SA released their General Household Survey for 2021⁴ – indicating that sadly no improvement has been made with regards to waste collection in South Africa. 35 % of households in South Africa still have to rely on communal or household refuse dumps, while 1,6 % of households have no facilities at all. The reality is that if we do not fix this “broken waste management system” all our other efforts will be less effective and even wasteful and fruitless activities. We can have the best redesigned product that is 100% recyclable. However, if it is not separated at household level and moved to a central place where it can be sorted for recycling then (with the current broken system) it will just end up in a landfill or the environment. We need to stop cherry picking and collect all waste to combat pollution.

Every piece of plastic has value and has the potential to be repurposed and recycled into something new. Whilst a battle rages on around the issue of litter in the environment, Plastics SA and its members will continue to make a tangible difference through various clean-up operations and initiatives that help to keep our country’s river-catchment areas clean of plastic waste. We work in close partnership with all relevant stakeholders, including various levels of government, Producer Responsibility Organisations and educators to focus on improving waste management and recycling, offering ongoing education, training and awareness in communities around the country.

One such an example is the *Inkwazi Isu* (Fish Eagle) project which was launched along the KwaZulu-Natal South Coast after flash floods washed up tonnes of plastic litter onto beaches. Later this year, Plastics SA will once again be coordinating its annual Clean-Up & Recycle SA Week (12-17 September), which culminates in River Clean-up Day (14 September), National Recycling Day (16 September) and the World Clean-Up Day / International Coastal Clean-Up Day (17 September).

For more information, please visit www.plasticsinfo.co.za

ENDS

Notes to the editor:

- Plastics SA is the umbrella body representing the entire plastics industry value chain – including raw material suppliers, converters and manufacturers, recyclers and machine suppliers.
- Plastics SA is a founding member of the South African Initiative to End Plastic Pollution in the Environment and a signatory of the Declaration of the Global Plastics Associations for Solutions on Marine Litter and the Plastics Pact.

⁴ <https://www.statssa.gov.za/publications/P0318/P03182021.pdf>