

Plastic Pollution and the Media

Plastic pollution and waste threaten the health of living creatures on land and in water environments. In the following activities, you evaluate how plastics have been and are currently marketed in the media and then propose a plan for civic and community actions to address the issue of the impacts of plastics on the environment.

In 2019 alone, the world produced more than one ton of plastic for every person alive ([Plastic Pollution](#), Our World in Data, April 2022). One group estimated that humans worldwide go through **one trillion single-use plastic bags every year**, nearly 2 million every minute ([Earth Policy Institute, n.d.](#)).



[Image by Sergei Tokmakov from Pixabay.](#)

Environmental activists have called on everyone - from governments and companies to individuals and families - to reduce their use of plastic, but it is not easy to even imagine how to do so. Plastic offers so many positives, from life-saving technologies to daily conveniences.

Given society's dependence on plastics, is it possible for you to have a no-plastic day?

Writer A.J Jacobs decided to try to live without plastics for a day. In a [New York Times article](#), he detailed how he put away his iPhone (it has plastic components), sought plastic-free products for morning hygiene (charcoal mint toothpaste pellets instead of toothpaste from a plastic container), found old clothes that were plastic free, took a folding wooden chair for his seat on the subway, went shopping with cloth bags and glass jars, and paid for purchases

with coins instead of a credit card or paper money (bills have plastic fibers in them). Despite his best efforts, there was no way to avoid plastics. They are too interwoven into daily lives.

The expansive use of plastics comes not only from their affordability but also from many years of [deceptive marketing tactics](#) which made it seem like plastics were the best purchase because they were recyclable. While the Federal Trade Commission's "[Guides for the Use of Environmental Marketing Claims](#)" states that "it is deceptive to misrepresent, directly or by implication, that a product or package is recyclable" (p. 6), the plastics industry has successfully convinced the public that plastics can easily be recycled when, for the most part, plastics are buried, burned, or end up in the ocean ([Sullivan, 2020](#)).

What roles can governments, schools, and communities play in addressing the marketing plastic products that are harmful to the environment and world?

Activity 1: Research the History of Plastic Marketing in Media

- Read [How Big Oil Misled the Public into Believing Plastic Would Be Recycled](#) & [Deceptive Marketing 101: Recyclable Claims](#).
- Then, find at least 5 examples of advertisements for recycling that span at least three decades (e.g., 1980's, 1990's, 2020's).
- Use the [Teacher and Student Guide to Analyzing Advertisements](#) to critically investigate the design, production, distribution, and language used in these ads.

Present your findings as a magazine advertisement for or against recycling.

Activity 2: Propose a Plan for Civic Action

Writers Jay Sinha and Chantal Plamondon (2017) ([Life Without Plastic: The Practical Step-by-Step Guide to Avoiding Plastic to Keep Your Family and Planet Healthy](#), 2017) urge people to reduce the plastics they use throughout their day. For example, not using plastic straws, choosing shampoo bars instead of packaged shampoos, taking one's own paper containers to the store for purchases, and reusing containers instead of throwing them in the trash. Small efforts, they contend, can result in larger results. Using this idea of small actions/meaningful results, do at least one of the following activities:

- **Develop a civic action plan** for how your school, family, and/or people in your neighborhood can reduce the use of plastics. As part of the plan, identify specific actions and changes that individuals can take as part of their daily lives and routines.
- **Propose policies** that educators or local governments should take to reduce plastic consumption and waste in school buildings and local neighborhoods. Explore the *Building Democracy for All* e-Book [Chapter 6.9: ENGAGE What Single-Use Plastic Items Should Local Governments Ban to Help Save the Environment?](#) to learn more.
- **Write a letter to your representative or senator indicating your position** on the [Environmental Justice for All Act](#). The EJ for All Act, introduced in Congress in 2021, seeks to combat environmental pollution and harm hard facing communities of color, low-income communities, and Native/Indigenous nations and communities.

Additional Resources

- [End Plastic Pollution](#): Text of the Resolution adopted by the United Nations Environmental Assembly, March 2, 2022.
- [Turning Off the Tap: How the World Can End Plastic Pollution and Create a Circular Economy](#). United Nations Environmental Program (May 2023). The UN urges everyone to reuse, recycle and reorient to making and using sustainable materials.
- [Science Matters: History and Future of Plastics](#) from the Science History Institute summarizes developments in plastic production from the invention of the first synthetic polymer in 1869 to the explosion of plastics during World War II and the postwar years to the growing realization that plastic use and waste have grave environmental consequences.
- **WIKI RESOURCE:** [The Environmental Movement](#)
 - Influential Literature page: [Rachel Carson and Silent Spring](#)
 - Dramatic Event page: [The Clean Air Act](#)
 - Special Topic page: [Climate Change and Global Warming](#)



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