

Down to the last straw

Businesses reducing use of plastic straws to encourage people to switch to eco-friendly options



LOW LIPING

Foreword Coffee has used a total of zero plastic straws since it opened at the National University of Singapore (NUS) last August.

Mr Lim Wei Jie, the founder and director of the social enterprise, said: "When we started, we wanted to look at sustainability with regard to consuming coffee. We use the same paper cups for both hot and cold drinks because we want to reduce the use of plastic."

He added that the paper cups eliminate the need for straws, since they come with lids designed for sipping.

"The moment you give people an alternative, they realise they don't actually need plastic straws," he said. "We have some paper straws only in case (of necessity)."

A major source of litter picked up at beach clean-ups (see other story), plastic straws have also emerged as a promising, potential gateway to reducing dependency on single-use plastics.

Companies big and small are recognising the need to reduce access to plastic straws.

Last Thursday, foodcourt operator Koufu launched its Say No to Plastic Straws initiative.

Straws are now given to customers only upon request at its Singapore Management University (SMU) outlet, and depending on the response, the company may expand the initiative to its other foodcourts.

SMU president Arnoud De Meyer said: "This will go a long way towards cultivating a mindfulness about the harmful use of plastic."

Another cafe, Common Man Coffee Roasters, started providing metal straws at both of its outlets at the start of this year.

Before the switch, a box of 10,000 plastic straws would last only two months at its outlet in Martin Road.

Brand manager Sarah Rouse said: "We decided to switch to metal straws as part of our

wider effort to look for new ways to improve our operations and make a positive change to the environment we live and work in."

Although it has received a lot of encouraging feedback, some customers do not want to use the metal straws, possibly thinking that they are not cleaned properly, she said.

"However, I think they don't realise it is no different from drinking from a restaurant's glass or using the provided cutlery, it is just a psychological barrier to overcome."

Plastic straws are provided upon request for takeaway orders.

Younger Singaporeans are "questioning the materialistic and wasteful lifestyles that developed in Singapore over the past few decades", said Mr Michael Broadhead, the volunteer director of sustainability festival EarthFest.

"Reusable straws are a simple place to start," he said. "Generally, if people start with one change, they will take additional steps once the previous one has become a habit."

GROWING AWARENESS

Ms Melissa Lam, the founder of Bamboo Straws Worldwide, said there is a growing awareness of the eco-friendliness of reusable straws, which can be made of metal, bamboo or glass and usually come with straw cleaners and a drawstring bag to keep the products.

She sources the bamboo for her straws from farms and families from South-east Asian countries such as Indonesia and the Philippines.

The 26-year-old said: "At the beginning, my customers were mostly Americans, Australians and Europeans."

But as of the middle of last year, the majority of her customers became local.

Currently, local orders make up about 80 per cent of her sales, up from less than 5 per cent in 2015, she added.

Miss Sam Thian, 23, offers metal and glass straws through her social enterprise Seastainable Co, which she started in January.

Before Seastainable, Miss Thian worked as a whale shark



(Above) Cups with bamboo straws. (Left) Melissa Lam runs a business selling bamboo straws. TNP PHOTOS: LIM YAOHUI, LIN ZHAOWEI



Reuse a plastic straw? No, but we can reduce

ETHAN LEUNG

It started off as a joke.

I vowed that for a whole week, I could just reuse a disposable plastic bubble tea straw for lunch.

I was convinced that a plastic straw would do the job just as well as the artisanal bamboo straw that my colleague took around everywhere she went.

I had nothing to lose. The plastic straw was free, unlike my colleague's \$12 bamboo straw.

Let's just say that I did not fare as well as I thought I would.

I kept forgetting to take my straw for lunch, avoiding drinks until I returned to the office where I could use my straw.

I deem my experiment a failure. But I learnt a thing or two.

Plastic straws are cheap, disposable and single-use. Just like a plastic bag, there is no sense of ownership to a simple piece of plastic.

So it is easy to forget their existence all together, which is why I constantly forgot to take my straw with me.

In comparison, we would feel a sense of attachment towards straws made of more expensive materials like bamboo or metal.

And plastic straws have been so deeply embedded into our culture as something we are entitled to. They are available everywhere.

Some places even take this

too far. Bartenders often put two straws in cocktails. Some bubble tea shops have straws that are twice as long as they need to be.

When a plastic straw is that easily accessible, you don't think twice about using it.

I believe that charging people for the use of plastic straws would be unnecessarily heavy-handed. But stores can still do their part in reducing plastic waste by only giving out straws when customers ask for them.

BAN

Cities like Seattle have enacted plastic straw bans.

McDonald's recently announced that they will be moving plastic straws behind the counter in their United Kingdom outlets.

But why is it even important to reduce the use of plastic straws?

Half a billion plastic straws are wasted every day in the US alone, according to media reports. These are not easily recyclable.

Many end up in the ocean where they are ingested by marine wildlife. Yet many still do not know about the consequences to the environment.

So it is high time for me to live a less wasteful life. And it begins with a simple straw.

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Non-profit green initiative Little Green Men found over 2,000 plastic straws in just an hour during a clean-up operation at Pasir Ris Park.
PHOTO: LITTLE GREEN MEN

Littering sees mangrove creatures draw the short straw

On a coastal clean-up in the mangroves of Pasir Ris Park last June, 15 volunteers from the non-profit green initiative Little Green Men picked up over 2,000 plastic straws in just an hour.

"We wanted to quantify them so it would make a bigger impact. So we decided to collect them separately and count them after the clean-up," said Ms Frances Loke Wei, 24, who started Little Green Men in 2016 with a friend.

The part-time research assistant added that straws could easily be mistaken for food by animals – such as herons and horseshoe crabs – living in the mangroves, which are out of bounds to the public without special permission.

For example, birds may mistake

flattened straws for flatworms, or red straws for ribbon worms.

Miss Loke said: "The public area of Pasir Ris Park is clean and green, but beyond the tree line where the mangroves are, that's where a lot of the trash accumulates.

"And when it's out of sight, very often, it's out of mind."

Through coastal clean-up activities like this, she hopes to get people thinking about their rubbish.

"We can't clear everything, but I hope that seeing the trash firsthand will encourage people reflect on their habits and change them."

Although rubbish in Singapore is incinerated, plastic straws can still find their way into water bodies when people litter, said N. Sivasothi, senior lecturer at the Depart-

ment of Biological Science of the National University of Singapore.

Litter can then get into the waterways, rivers and seas, affecting local wildlife like otters and turtles.

He added that all plastics eventually break down to produce microplastics, which are consumed by animals. Plastic is then amplified up the food chain in the seafood people consume.

Mr Sivasothi said: "Consciousness about the prevalence of single-use disposable plastics and solutions through sustainable alternatives should be an important part of human consciousness, especially in cities. Here, we can make small changes which bring about great reductions due to our high population densities." – **LOW LIPING**