

We need to make a change, before it's too late.

Grace Oloi, Te Atatu Intermediate School

Plastic waste is a massive problem across the world, and New Zealand is no different. From cigarette butts to fast food packaging, each day the amount of plastic littered into our precious oceans is increasing exponentially. We need to make a change.

Despite plastic waste being a prominent topic in the media for several years now, there is a lack of discussion around ways to reduce the problem. Whilst people today are willing to pay that little bit extra for biodegradable options, we need to remember that biodegradable waste can still find its way into marine life and their ecosystem.

In the area I live there's a beautiful estuary called Orangihina. It is located on the eastern edge of Te Atatu Peninsula in West Auckland. The reserve looks out onto the harbour and Auckland city, giving Orangihina its more commonly known name, Harbourview Reserve.

With huge grass patches and public toilets, the park is a great spot for gatherings and picnics. Unfortunately, this increases the chance of litter being dropped and making its way into our oceans. I have been looking at ways that we can reduce plastic waste, for our environment and for Orangihina's benefit.

Although Orangihina is known for its scenic area and views, the estuary plays a big part in helping to clear out and prevent any litter from making its way into Auckland Harbour. Its healthy ecosystem has the ability to filter through any dropped litter and store it in the estuary to decompose.

As the amount of plastic waste that is discarded increases, the harder it is for the estuary to do its job effectively, and the ecosystem will slowly start to die. This is why it is crucial for us to be mindful of the environment around us, especially areas that are sacrificing themselves for other places to be free from litter - like Orangihina.

I decided to visit Orangihina to see for myself how big the problem was and what the main types of litter were. Not surprisingly, a majority of what I saw were cigarette butts and fast food packaging.

According to multiple international studies, cigarette butts were the most littered item in 2018. They are extremely harmful to our environment, causing seven litres of toxic water around a single butt when dropped into the ocean. And whilst it doesn't look like it, cigarette butts are

actually made out of a plastic called cellulose acetate, meaning when someone obliviously tosses a cigarette out the window and into our environment, it's not just the nicotine and other chemicals that are in cigarettes being emitted into our air. The cigarette butt itself will take years to decompose, and when the cellulose acetate finally does decompose, it leaves tiny bits of plastic which end up in our waterways and marine life.

Other than completely banning smoking, which some may argue is unrealistic, the next best option could be to make biodegradable cigarette butts mainstream. 'Green butts' or biodegradable butts are an alternative to the normal plastic butts that a majority of cigarette manufacturers use. Biodegradable butts are far better for our environment, but more costly for cigarette companies. Governments could consider providing tax incentives to cigarette companies that use biodegradable butts. If more and more smokers use biodegradable cigarettes, the butt itself wouldn't stay around for as long, so there is less chance over time for them to be blown into our oceans.

As I saw at Orangihina, packaging is another huge environmental problem. From fast food packaging, online shopping packaging or even the packaging around day-to-day items you buy at the grocery store, so much of it ends up in our environment. We know that packaging is a critical and necessary part of a product, but most companies only design and produce single-use packaging and although it looks sleek and inviting, our environment thinks differently.

Companies such as McDonald's are contributing to this issue, and it could be said that they aren't doing much to solve it. Is all of their packaging necessary? Is there a way to reduce the amount of plastic when designing the packaging? To go even further, fast food companies could allow their employees to have a day off every month to volunteer and help clean up litter around our roads or estuaries. Or perhaps they could consider sponsoring an initiative such as Plastic Free July that supports keeping our environment clean. With the budget from a large company like McDonalds behind it, there would be more funding to increase awareness of the initiative to get the public involved and interested.

This issue isn't just with fast food, but with the packaging around sushi and Asian takeaways. The amount of single-use plastic surrounding the sushi, then the plastic knives and forks all gathered up into a plastic bag is shocking and none of it is recyclable. A great alternative to solve this problem could be to have a BYO system for containers to store either sushi or Asian takeaways. Business owners could even consider offering a price discount for customers who bring in their own containers to encourage people to have the mindset of reusing and recycling. This will also look good for the businesses who implement this.

Although there are many ways that companies can work to reduce plastic waste in our environment, there is also so much that we can all personally do to help. One of them being participating in initiatives like Plastic Free July. Plastic Free July is one of the biggest plastic-free initiatives worldwide and is helping increase awareness of plastic pollution and educate people from all over the world about the impact that plastic waste is making on the environment. The challenge is designed to give you ideas on how to reduce the amount of single-use plastic you

are using daily, and ways to recycle it. This Australian campaign started in 2011 and now has over 250 million participants in 177 countries, and is still growing.

At Te Atatu Intermediate, Kaitiakitanga, meaning guardianship and protection, is one of our school values and currently one of our main focuses. To implement Kaitiakitanga into our daily lives, teachers at Te Atatu Intermediate are encouraging us to take part in an initiative called 10 a day, challenging us to pick up 10 items of dropped litter everyday. Not only is this cleaning up our planet, we are displaying several UN's Sustainable Development Goals such as Life Below Water (goal 14) by preventing litter into our waterways and into marine life.

Initiatives like these are helping us change the planet and potentially achieve our goal of becoming free from any plastic waste.

Sometimes however it is one step forward, three steps back and 2020 is a great example of that. With the global pandemic we are facing, personal protective equipment (PPE) is becoming the most littered item of 2020. Littered PPE is a huge risk for not only animals and the environment but also causing danger to us if contaminated.

Biodegradable cigarette butts and our fast food outlets showing more corporate responsibility will help, but it's just the beginning. We need to make a change now more than ever. Estuaries like the beautiful Orangihina are suffering because of our actions, it's our duty to turn that around and show more respect for our environment.