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Let's stop the toxic sunscreen burn

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It is time for the USVI to join Key West and Hawaii in banning sunscreen that contains oxybenzone and octinoxate, two of the most dangerous chemicals commonly found in popular sunscreen products.

Not only are they known carcinogens, but according to the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), there is scientific evidence indicating that oxybenzone is deadly to coral and threatens overall reef health by causing coral bleaching, harming or killing coral larvae through DNA damage and acting as an endocrine disruptor.

We have already lost 80 percent of the coral reefs in the Caribbean due to pollution and a variety of other issues. We can't afford to lose more.

Just last week, the Food and Drug Administration released a proposal to update regulations for sunscreen, including steps to address the safety of active ingredients, a long overdue initiative.

Island Green Living has advocated for a USVI ban of sunscreens with dangerous chemicals such as oxybenzone for the past two years. According to the Coral Reef Alliance, coral reefs have the highest biodiversity of any of the planet's ecosystems and are vital to protecting coastlines and supporting marine life.

Given our tourism-driven economy, it is especially important that we protect our coral system and marine life — the very things that bring visitors to our beautiful islands and fuel our economy.

Coral toxicity begins at concentrations equivalent to one drop in an Olympic-size pool, or 62 parts per trillion, according to The Washington Post. Levels of oxybenzone in some coral reefs in the USVI are 20 to 40 times higher than tolerable levels, resulting in serious damage to our ecosystems. This is alarming.

Chemicals such as oxybenzone and octinoxate wash into our waters when people swim and when they use beach showers or sunscreen spray. They also contaminate when rain flushes wastewater from our shores and off boats into the sea. According to a study published in the scientific journal Archives of Environmental Contamination and Toxicology, bleached corals are still alive, but their recovery depends on new coral growth, which is impeded by further exposure to sunscreen.

If exposure to toxins continues, it can cause ossification of coral larvae, encasing them in their own skeleton. They become less resilient to climate change and this ultimately leads to disintegration of the coral reefs.

While sunscreen is meant to protect us from sunburn and skin cancer, studies show that some chemical ingredients can actually cause cancer in users as well as other health issues. For example, oxybenzone, which is absorbed into the bloodstream through the skin, can disrupt hormones by acting like estrogen. This is simply not acceptable. The weight of evidence, built over at least 20 years of research and hundreds of peer-reviewed scientific articles, demonstrates that chemicals like oxybenzone are not only dangerous to users, but also toxic to corals and other marine life.

What can we do to protect ourselves?

There are 200-plus sunscreens available on the market, including Walgreen's store brand, which are oxybenzone-free. This, coupled with wearing rash guards, sun hats and other coverings, can help ensure more safety for our coral, marine life and ourselves.

Key to success is public education. Such a ban could even be a draw for tourism with the launch of a "Come Swim the Oxybenzone-Banned Waters of V.I." campaign, as well as partnerships and engagement with cruise lines and airlines. These are some ideas being floated by Island Green Living.

Earlier this month, Key West joined Hawaii in passing legislation banning the sale of sunscreen containing oxybenzone and octinoxate. Hawaii's legislation, the first of its kind, passed in 2018. The Republic of Palau also recently passed a ban on toxic sunscreen, including 10 harmful ingredients.

We, too, have legislation in the works. However, as responsible citizens we need to educate ourselves and steer clear because we understand the consequences, not simply because it is the law. There are healthier alternatives for blocking harmful UV rays such as those containing zinc oxide and titanium dioxide.

We can make a difference. We must ban sunscreen with harmful chemicals and in the meantime, we need our store owners and wholesalers to stop importing toxic sunscreen and import mineral-based sunscreen. We need the public to read ingredients prior to purchasing and change our own behavior.

Let's continue to move forward on green initiatives that promote our resiliency and sustainability. Hawaii and Key West's bans will not take effect until 2021 but given our size, we can implement before the end of 2019 with legislation sponsored by Sen. Marvin Blyden, which is now in the hands of fellow senators.

Let's allow coral a fighting chance to flourish, which will help sustain our marine life and tourism, and put an end to the toxic sunscreen burn.

— *Harith Wickrema, St. John, is president of the Island Green Living Association.*