

**Testimony of Harith Wickrema, President
Island Green Living Association (Island Green)
Before the
Thirty-Second Legislature of the Virgin Islands of the United States of
America
Committee on Government Affairs, Veterans, Energy and
Environmental Protection
on
An Act Amending Title 29 of Virgin Islands Code, Chapter 8
to include a ban on disposable plastic drinking straws & stirrers
July 2, 2018**

Good afternoon.

I am Harith Wickrema, President of Island Green Living Association. As many of you know, Island Green is a non-profit organization here in the territory dedicated to expanding sustainability in the USVI and beyond. Thank you for inviting me to provide testimony in support of banning disposable plastic drinking straws and stirrers, legislation introduced by Senators Janelle K. Sarauw and Myron D. Jackson. Such a ban complements the existing plastic bag ban, further reducing the generation of waste that would otherwise find its way into the sea and/or add to our landfills.

If the current trend continues, plastic production is estimated to increase four-fold by 2050 according to Plastics—the Facts 2014/2015: An Analysis of European Plastics Production, Demand and Waste Report. Plastic, a material invented to last forever, simply can't be used to make products intended to be thrown away.

Five hundred million plastic straws are used **every day** in the U.S. according to BeStrawFree. To put it in perspective, that would fill over 127 school buses each day, or more than 46,400 school buses every year. That is enough straw waste to

wrap the circumference of the earth 2.5 times each day! The vast majority of those straws and stirrers end up in the environment, according to Better Alternatives Now (BAN 2.0), an analysis put together by several pollution research groups.

According to John Cavelli, Executive Vice President of Public Affairs for the Wildlife Conservation Society: "...the one piece of plastic that is never recycled are plastic straws because they are too small, and they end up either in a landfill or they end up in the oceans." A survey conducted by global market research company Streetbees asked people whether they would support a full or partial ban on plastic straws – 91 percent said that they would and 82 percent described plastic straws as "very harmful" to the environment. This demonstrates the level of awareness and interest in taking this vital step.

Straws are less dense than seawater, so they float around the ocean and eventually break down into smaller particles (microplastics). Fish and aquatic birdlife then ingest these microplastics. Although there needs to be more research on this topic, these chemicals may accumulate in the flesh of the fish – and in us when we eat our favorite seafood.

The plastic particles don't degrade in the ocean environment. Instead, they subsist for hundreds of years and fundamentally alter the chemistry of the sea. The pervasiveness of plastic and our failure to dispose of it properly has resulting in a land mass, known as the Great Pacific Garbage Patch, floating between California and Hawaii. 99.9 % of this patch, which is twice the size of Texas according to *USA Today*, is made up of plastic. Eighty percent of all marine debris found in the ocean is land-based, and 80-90% of the marine debris is made from plastic.

It may be hard to believe that something so small as a plastic straw could cause such harm, but they are ranked **fifth** in terms of the most common types of plastics found in coastal cleanups according to BAN 2.0. You can walk on any beach here in the territory and find straws littering the shoreline, strewn along the roadways, in parks and other public areas.

The good news is that straws, for the most part, are not a necessity but rather used for convenience or out of habit. There are instances where medical conditions or disabilities require that straws be used however straws made of paper or other compostable materials are also an option and exceptions can certainly be made in those cases regardless. Perhaps the ban can be waived in rare instances where no alternatives are available such as hospitals and nursing homes, for example.

Our fragile eco-systems, mounting waste output and dependence on tourism make the US Virgin Islands – and many Caribbean islands -- especially vulnerable to environmental damage and the economic devastation, health & wellness issues that come with it. We host two million visitors a year – tourism is our primary industry and economic generator. We need those visitors – but they exacerbate our already pressing litter/waste management issues for our roughly 105,000 residents.

Although personally I would prefer to see a full ban on the sale and importation of disposable plastic straws and stirrers in the territory, according to BAN 2.0's study, most of the plastic straws that find their way into oceans and the environs are from restaurants and packaged/prepared food vendors, so it is an excellent start. And the fact is that visitors to our island, numbering nearly 20 times our residents, primarily obtain straws from restaurants, bars and other food vendors.

An alternative would be COMPOSTABLE straws made of paper and other environmentally friendly material, although they are slightly pricier than plastic. Note that the label BIODEGRADABLE is misleading as, unlike truly COMPOSTABLE material, most biodegradable straws are made from polylactic acid and can only decompose in an industrial composting facility, which of course we do not have here. In other words, they would end up in our waterways, littering our parks and communities and in our landfills just like regular straws.

An innovator in the area of eco-friendly straws is LOLIWARE. Their LOLISTRAW is the world's first hyper-compostable, edible drinking straw consisting of materials derived from seaweed. They are edible and can also break down in the organics bin alongside food waste in 60 days or less. According to LOLIWARE co-founder Chelsea Briganti: "Single-use plastics should never be 'built to last,' they should be DESIGNED TO DISAPPEAR." She goes on to say: "Our world needs a radically new approach to our daily consumption of single-use plastics which too often go to a landfill or pollute oceans. Our solutions transform disposables into 'plant fuel' through composting or 'human fuel' through consumption."

Another option is truly REUSABLE straws made of bamboo, metal or glass. Reusable plastic straws are problematic because they are rarely used more than a handful of times and then they too become part of the waste stream.

The very best option would be to mandate providing eco-friendly straws UPON REQUEST ONLY, a measure included in the language of legislation in a number of jurisdictions. Getting people to turn down a straw – or better yet, only provide one when requested - is a gateway to a more sustainable lifestyle. As noted by

Diana Lofflin, founder of StrawFree.org: “You use a straw for 10 minutes, and it never goes away.”

The promising news is that the movement to ban straws and other single-use plastics is growing in the United States and around the world. The United Kingdom has announced plans to do away with plastic straws, stirrers and cotton swabs by 2019 and they are already banned in Vancouver, Canada. Taiwan is eliminating straws and other single use plastic items, with a full ban going into effect by 2030.

In the United States, New York City, Hawaii, and California have pending straw ban legislation. In California, Alameda, Carmel, San Luis Obispo, Davis, Malibu, Manhattan Beach, Oakland, Richmond and Berkeley are eliminating plastic straws and other disposable plastic food service items. Seattle and Edmonds in Washington, Monmouth Beach in New Jersey, and Miami Beach and Fort Myers in Florida have bans set as well.

Additionally a number of companies such as Alaska Airlines, national food service giant Bon Appétit and British businesses like McDonalds UK, London City Airport, Costa Coffee and Marriott’s British properties have also initiated bans that include plastic straws and stirrers.

It is time for the U.S. Virgin Islands to join the crusade and lead the movement in the Caribbean and beyond.

Until the early 1960s, paper straws ruled the market. But plastic straws, offering a more durable drinking experience, began increasing in popularity. “The paper straw had a slow death throughout the 1960s and into the 1970s,” said David

Rhodes, manager of Aardvark Paper Drinking Straws, a manufacturer of paper straws. **THIS NEEDS TO BE REVERSED.** We as a society can do better.

Senators, it is imperative that we continue to be part of the solution to global sustainability issues. If we work together, we can preserve our islands, protect ourselves from environmental, health and economic devastation while serving as a model for others to follow.

At this point, I'd like to leave you with this trailer for the documentary STRAWS:

<http://www.strawsfilm.com/>

Let's make the last straw you used be the LAST STRAW – EVER.

Thank you.