

V.I. needs to take action now on implementing toxic sunscreen ban

Dear Editor,

Our Legislature is doing right by the environment with the passage of laws meant to protect us all. But how are they being implemented to accomplish the intended goals?

Sadly, to date the plastic bag ban hasn't succeeded. Most stores are still providing plastic bags under the guise of "compostable" — which won't decompose in landfills. And there seems to be little to no awareness that there is a plastic straw ban. Straws are even handed out in the King Airport cafeteria.

Let's ensure the same fate doesn't befall the Toxic Sunscreen Ban (Bill No. 33-0043), led by Senators Marvin Blyden and Janelle Sarauw, which passed unanimously June 25.

When Gov. Albert Bryan Jr. signs the bill into law this month, history will be made with the most far-reaching protections for coral, marine life and human health in the United States. The law, which bans the importation, sale and possession of sunscreen containing the "toxic 3 Os" of oxybenzone, octinoxate and octocrylene, goes into effect on March 30, 2020, a full nine months earlier than any other U.S. ban. It also adds the ingredient octocrylene to the chemicals banned in Hawaii and Key West, making safer mineral sunscreens the default choice. The territory will be the first to embrace the FDA's recent announcement recognizing only zinc oxide and titanium dioxide (mineral sunscreen) as safe and effective sunscreen ingredients.

The "toxic 3 Os" are deadly to coral, causing bleaching, "zombie coral," and other destruction. These ingredients also disrupt hormones and can cause cell damage and severe allergies in humans. There are a number of factors that affect our coral, such as global warming and storm water sediment runoff. But we can make a difference — regeneration of healthy coral can begin once these chemicals are out of the water. In addition to providing crucial protections to our environment, community and visitors, this law puts us in a leadership position on sustainability. It gives us a unique opportunity to leverage and promote our exceptional tourism product as well — perhaps the first step toward true eco-tourism? The commissioner of Tourism has a golden opportunity served on a silver platter.

Passing the legislation is one step — it is imperative that awareness, public education, implementation, and enforcement are key parts of the plan.

A campaign along the lines of "Come



Harith Wickrema

Swim the Oxybenzone-Free Waters of the V.I. — Nice" would be compelling and build awareness. Grass roots efforts will also be essential — we invite the public to share their ideas. Island Green has long advocated for a ban of toxic sunscreen chemicals and offers the following initial actions as a guide to mapping the course for change:

- Create a ceremonial media event at Trunk Bay celebrating the signing of the bill, with the governor "introducing" the legislation and its significance and possibly including celebrities associated with the territory, senators, National Park superintendent and area schoolchildren — our future. Recommend the last week of July to keep the momentum.

- As follow-up to my conversation with former President Bill Clinton, officially request the Clinton Global Initiative's assistance with guiding leadership of American, Delta, United, Jet Blue, Cape Air, Royal Caribbean, Carnival, Holland America, Disney Cruise Line, MSC, etc., to join the crusade. Ask of these travel partners:

- When an airline ticket is issued, an automated notification about the ban is provided, with a link to the Tourism website or Island Green website for further details.

- All flights to St. Thomas and St. Croix to show a PSA video 30 minutes before landing. It could feature the CEO of the airline and our governor and offer information about what to do upon arrival to declare sunscreen and secure a free sample.

- Once the flight lands, the ground staff can mention a "sunscreen swap" opportunity during the welcome announcement.

- Cruise line passengers to receive a special message with their departure/boarding documents and on their websites, etc.

- Aboard cruise ships, the excursion booking desk will include signage and onboard only mineral-based, reef-safe sunscreen to be sold.

- In-room video to show a PSA with governor/cruise executives.

- Each inflight/cruise magazine to devote

a full page PSA or story featuring details on the ban and alternatives along with details on USVI coral and a snorkeling guide.

- Permanent signage at the ports of entry, all beaches/National Park, hotels, restaurants, shops, etc., regarding toxic sunscreen dangers and the ban.

- When visitors arrive at the airport (and possibly at other ports of entry), they will be invited to "declare and swap" their toxic sunscreen for samples of coral-safe sunscreen and given a coupon to a local retailer for a giveaway.

- Launch an awareness campaign with Airbnb, VRBO, Booking.com, TripAdvisor, Expedia, etc., as well as the Hotel Association — information included in reservation confirmation materials, cards/tents in-room, etc.

- Attorney general to send official notification to Amazon, Vitacost, Walmart, Target and other mail order retailers regarding the ban and confiscation and fines associated with the law.

- Identify yacht/boating and other water sports providers as well as villa rental companies to educate clients/customers.

- Governor or Legislature to proclaim Coral-Safe Sunscreen Day — March 30 — the day the total ban takes effect.

- Free sunscreen stations at popular beaches, possibly sponsored by local organizations/businesses.

- Existing national advertising and public relations campaigns to add toxic sunscreen ban information. Engagement of the ad agency of the Tourism board.

- Tourism magazines and other tourist-related maps, etc. to have PSA.

- Phone book inclusion — all three islands.
- Identify national ocean-friendly/reef-friendly organizations/advocacies, to partner on awareness.

- Approach the United Nations Environment Programme to designate an International Coral-Safe Sunscreen Day, born in the USVI.

- Schools to launch month-long coral/reef education contests. Prizes sponsored by Island Green.

- Advocate for Amazon, Vitacost, etc., to follow Whole Food's policy of only selling reef-safe sunscreen.

- Local radio, TV, newspaper, billboard, etc., awareness campaign via PSA.

- Government and Tourism websites to include

link to safe sunscreens and media releases to include tag line about the ban and the positive message of "Come Swim the Oxybenzone-Free Waters of V.I. — Nice."

- Campaign aimed at local environmentally focused community groups/nonprofits and general visitor/community groups encouraging them to spread the word about toxic sunscreen.

- In addition to official notification from appropriate government entities, the formation of a "Sunscreen Taskforce" consisting of interested/dedicated individuals will help build awareness. Positive promotion of "recommended" retailers that adhere to restrictions.

- Ensure all government departments/entities involved in implementation/enforcement are fully informed about restrictions (for example, the U.S. Postmaster to intercept wholesale shipments that include banned sunscreen).

Working together, the territory CAN succeed. Let's get the toxic sunscreen ban right and ensure awareness and implementation are fully in force. Then let's help others in the region follow our lead. After all, we all share the same ocean.

Perhaps Gov. Bryan can forge a coalition of prime ministers from neighboring Caribbean island nations to embrace coral-safe mineral sunscreens vs. chemical sunscreens. Such a joint effort, lead by the governor, would build a lasting legacy for generations to come. As the demand for coral-safe sunscreen grows, larger manufacturers will be forced to change their formulas — or acquire smaller producers who are already doing things right. We can perhaps even secure sponsorships from sunscreen partners to help offset the cost of implementation.

Please keep sharing your ideas. If non-governmental organizations, businesses, the government and community members work in sync, the USVI can become a successful case study in preserving coral and marine life for other island nations to follow.

Let's change course NOW.
— Harith Wickrema, St. John, is president of Island Green.

