

# ‘Let’s ensure the planet wins the battle against plastics’

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Dear Editor,

First facts and peer-reviewed scientific research findings, by the numbers:

- **500,000,000,000 — Plastic bags used each year**
- **100,000,000 —**
- **marine animals killed by plastics each year**
- **17,000,000 —**
- **barrels of oil used for plastic production each year**
- **13,000,000 — tonnes of plastic leaked into the ocean each year**
- **1,000,000 —**
- **plastic bottles bought every minute**
- **100**

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- **years for plastic to degrade in the environment**
  - **90%**
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- **of bottled water found to contain plastic particles**

The theme of this year's Earth Day gives critical focus on an issue that not only plagues us here in the territory – but overwhelms our world: Planet vs. Plastic. As a society we must REFUSE to continue our “single use” plastic addiction. It isn't enough to rely on recycling – we must Rethink, Reduce and Reuse — with Recycling only as the last resort.

According to a *Science Advances* report, of the 8.3 billion metric tons of plastic that has been produced, 6.3 billion metric tons have become plastic waste. And only 9% has been recycled.

Seventy-nine percent of plastic waste accumulates in landfills or remains in the natural environment as litter, according to *National Geographic*. This material then finds its way into our oceans or leaches into our soil, thus becoming a threat to our agricultural products.

Although recycling can help mitigate once plastic becomes part of the waste stream, the ultimate aim must be to stop consumption before that point. Until we beat our plastic “addiction” in our islands however, we must continue to collect and recycle plastic to prevent it from entering our beaches, land, ocean and landfill.

With our ghuts and the pervasive stormwater runoff in our territory, plastic pollution ravages our soil and sea. Leaching at our landfills is no secret either. The recent Bovoni landfill fire, ignited due to unprocessed organic green and brown material, cost the territory over \$1,000,000. Did it only burn organic material? NO. Since our waste is not source-separated, it is a foregone conclusion that it included plastic and other toxic materials.

While composting is a viable low-hanging solution for organic material, the long-range solution for plastic, including plastic water bottles, bags, straws, synthetic clothing, household plastic material, etc., is to RETHINK our wants and needs. We may never reach “zero plastic,” but we can reduce plastic use by investing and implementing innovative technologies including use of AI as well as bioplastic packaging made from renewable sources, intentionally choosing to forgo food, beverage and household items packaged in plastic, choosing clothing made of renewable material such as cotton, bamboo, etc, and even manufacturing longer-life products.

Let's emulate the adage "less is more." Rethink before we buy — ask yourself: Do I need it or do I want it?

Let's instill these values in our children who have the potential to be a powerful generation of green ambassadors, dedicated to saving our planet.

Greening education, embracing the UN's 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), even introducing and engaging the K-12 Planet Green Force concept, a collaboration incorporating Climate Science Literacy and Green Academies pillars of UNESCO, are some of the ways we, as small islands, can turn the tide.

In an effort to reduce plastic pollution, some of our school children have suggested we all use reusable water containers vs drinking from single-use plastic bottles. The scourge of plastic water bottles overwhelming us is unsustainable.

With scientific research showing that 90% of bottled water contains plastic particles, it is a personal and immediate health issue in addition to a risk to the environment, soil and oceans.

Let's encourage our leaders to lead by example by switching to reusable beverage containers.

The good news is that there is a precedent: the ozone layer is recovering. Scientists say that the hole will be closed in about a decade. Through behavior change, use of science, new technology, etc., much of the ozone layer is closed. If we put our minds and hearts to it, the science combined with the will of the people can be employed to find plastic pollution solutions.

Along with that, we call for making our airports "plastic-free" with water refill stations, increasing the availability of filling stations across the territory, and strengthening and enforcing laws that restrict plastics.

Let's educate our children, business leaders and the community in general to be mindful and reduce plastic consumption, find alternatives, and continue to raise awareness of single-use plastic hazards and their impact on our lives. This is especially important given our tourism based economy. Let's not become like some Asian and Pacific islands like Fiji, Samoa, Vanuatu, Vietnam, and yes even certain parts of Bali, where tourism is adversely affected by plastic.

The change starts with us. Let's ensure the planet wins the battle against plastics. Our world existed before plastic. Look for alternatives, do without when possible, practice less is more. Rethink, Reduce, Reuse – and as the last resort, Recycle.

— *Harith Wickrema, St. John, is president of Island Green Living and founder of Planet Green Force.*