

The verdict:  
We're not being  
told the truth  
about  
*recycling*

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## EVERYDAY PLASTIC

**In 2016, while out on a run, I stumbled across a pile of plastic entangled in washed-up seaweed. Shortly after, a query to my local council regarding plastic recycling garnered the response: "I'm afraid it's not available where you live".**

I struggled to compute this. Why was the opportunity for me to help the environment, tackle plastic pollution and responsibly dispose of my plastic waste being denied? Recycling is our way of doing good, right?

Ignorance is bliss and recycling allows us to obliviously get rid of our plastic waste. Sadly, it far from gets rid of the problem.

In fact, plastic recycling isn't just inadequate, it is a complete failure. Illustrated by the statistic that only 4% of my plastic waste would actually be recycled, it exposes plastic recycling as a system that barely exists in this country. More of the plastic that you throw into your recycling bin is actually sent to another country, and many people living in extreme poverty will work, eat and sleep amongst it. I don't know about you, but that makes me feel really angry and upset.

One year of throwing away 4,490 pieces of plastic waste made me stop and re-think. Recycling is a smokescreen. To make it work, we have to massively improve and invest in infrastructure, but also significantly reduce what we produce and use.

**Recycling is not and never will be the sole solution.**

It's amazing how your mindset can change over the course of a year and this very personal and exploratory journey has revealed a very

unfortunate truth... We are not being told the truth about recycling.

When I emptied my year-long collection of plastic waste from the 22 bin bags I'd accumulated, filling the floor of a massive warehouse with thousands of familiar products and brands, I was struck by shock and sadness. This was all the stuff I'd bought, used and chucked away in 2017. Such is the nature of our fast-moving throwaway society, I barely remembered using any of it. Collecting my plastic waste for a year certainly says a lot about me, but it also says a lot about us.

**Each piece of plastic waste is the legacy of a decision made, a thirst quenched, a belly filled, a wardrobe brightened or an iPhone unpacked.**

We're sleepwalking through supermarkets aisles, shopping malls and online retailers, consuming without opening our eyes or acknowledging the product wrapped in plastic packaging that we're holding in our hands. And here lies the heart of the issue.

**Plastic pollution is a by-product of consumerism**

- a culture that perfectly blends the interests of the economy and society. When a culture takes root, it grows, and our throwaway consumer culture has been both subtly indoctrinated and warmly embraced.

We need to consciously and purposefully take back control of our decision-making from the hands of marketers, advertisers, retailers, shareholders and policy-makers. Impulse buys, retail therapy and convenience stores are etched into

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everyday language, but really they're just catchy phrases that have been dreamt up in boardrooms. I work in marketing, and I never thought I'd say this, but we really are being sold stuff we do not need.

**There is an epidemic of over-production and over-consumption.**

The temptation to buy shiny new things is always going to be present because it's how our modern society is programmed. To resist consuming is to swim against the tide.

When you're choosing between Hula Hoops and Wotsits on your next lunch break, consider the packaging, just for a moment: where did it come from? Who made it? How many resources were used, how many hours and how much energy did it take to create? That crisp packet was specifically designed to be thrown away. Then pause to consider that: it has been specifically designed to be thrown away. This needs to be urgently addressed.

**We need to design stuff that doesn't have to be thrown away.**

We need to keep plastic waste in the system and out of the natural environment, and move towards a circular economy. It's funny to refer to a much loved piece of packaging that almost became obsolete, but the glass milk bottle is a perfect example of a circular economy. It's delivered, consumed, returned, washed, sterilised, refilled with milk, delivered and repeated. After it's been through this cycle around 25 times, it'll get melted down and turned back into a milk bottle, ready to start the sequence again.

Food packaging waste is having a huge impact on our environment. We

calculated that 67% of the packaging I threw away was used to pack, wrap or consume food. More pointedly, our everyday items such as vegetables, nuts, bread, fruit, crisps, cereal, pasta, toilet paper, chocolate bars, washing tablets, chips, sugar, coffee and cheese are all pointlessly packaged in flimsy, thin, low value, non-recyclable plastic film - and that plastic film made up nearly half of everything I used.

**If most of it cannot be reused and none of it can be recycled, then why are we so reliant on plastic film and how have we ended up in a situation where there are no alternatives?**

Sitting here, writing this in September 2018, almost two years after I decided to start the Everyday Plastic project, I'm a reformed and recovering consumer. From childhood to adulthood, I've made hundreds, probably thousands of gratuitous purchases, but now I've stopped buying things in the same way that I used to.

**Reducing my consumption has made way for greater resourcefulness and creativity.**

My fridge is less full, I reuse tubs and jars, I buy longer-lasting tinned goods, I repair my things (badly) and unsurprisingly, I'm a fully functional human being with the things that I already have.

These conclusions are by no means extensive. I haven't touched on the influence of the fossil fuel industry, local authority funding cuts, recycling target exploitation, how the packaging industry should pay their way, government and

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industry transparency on collection and disposal, subsidies for innovators, supermarket superiority and so on.

The key objective of this experiment was always to improve our understanding of our individual impact on plastic pollution. I want to share as much as I've learned over this two year investigation as possible, so you don't have to go through the same laborious and lengthy process. Everyday Plastic provides us with a very personal connection to the plastic waste we throw away.

**Learning to connect with and reduce what we consume not only addresses the issue of plastic pollution, it can also improve our society as a whole.**

**After all, plastic pollution is not just an environmental issue. It's a human one.**

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# How can I reduce my own individual impact on plastic pollution

**Collecting every piece of plastic I used in a year took willpower, motivation and a shift in habit. This can easily be applied to reducing the amount of plastic we use. We need to swap convenience for a stubborn resistance. It can be done.**

There are steps you can take that turn out to be cheaper and easier in the long run than using plastic. If I'd have completely given up plastic water bottles, coffee cups, straws, stirrers, cutlery, bags and shower gel, I would have thrown away 316 fewer items in 2017.

Even if we applied this amnesty to half the UK population, we could prevent 10 billion pieces from entering the waste system. And this is the key. Reducing the amount of plastic we produce and consume reduces the impact on our global waste system.

**So don't let anyone ever tell you that individuals can't make a difference!**