



## Life in plastic, ain't fantastic

The United Nations is launching a global treaty to reduce plastic pollution in our environment. Here's what cottagers can do to aid the cause **BY MATTHEW HALLIDAY**

**ONE MORNING LATE** this spring, my three-year-old-son and I left our home in Halifax, bound for the family cottage on New Brunswick's Northumberland Shore. Before we left town, however, I had to make good on a promise I'd made to him: new beach toys. His old set of plastic buckets and shovels was broken, so before leaving the city, we dropped by a dollar store for replacements. We weren't disappointed. The seasonal onslaught of cheap beach toys was well underway; there was an entire aisle's worth of plastic buckets, rakes, castle moulds, and sea creatures. Ten dollars later, we set out for the seashore with a set of fun-but-flimsy new toys, sure to be chipped, cracked, and in need of replacement again by summer's end.

When we arrived, the beach toys joined the abundant plastic products already found in every nook and cranny of the cottage: drawers full of plastic cutlery for parties and picnics, the plastic-encapsulated coffee pods that had replaced the French press, a

new outdoor rug for the deck, made of mildew-resistant polypropylene fibres. Oh, and the deck chairs? Plastic too.

"When you think of it, most things we use at the lake contain plastic in some way," says Sarah King, the head of Greenpeace Canada's Oceans & Plastics Campaign. "Throw pillows, patio furniture, even beach towels. It's everywhere."

Unfortunately, this proliferation of plastic isn't unique to the cottage. Canadians dispose of about three million tonnes of plastic waste every year, which mostly ends up in our landfills, lakes, rivers, forests, and elsewhere in nature. There's plastic found in the bellies of seabirds, an estimated one million of which die every year due to ingesting it. It's found its way to the earth's deepest ocean trenches and onto the highest mountain summits. Tiny microplastics—small, sometimes microscopic particles worn off of larger products—lie buried in Arctic snows and drift through urban air. >>



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## easy plastic swap-outs for life at the lake

### COFFEE PODS



CHEMEX GLASS  
POUR-OVER MAKER

\$65, [crateandbarrel.ca](http://crateandbarrel.ca)

### CLING WRAP



BEESWAX FOOD  
WRAPS, SET OF THREE

\$22, [mindyourbeeswraps.com](http://mindyourbeeswraps.com)

### PLASTIC STRAWS



SMOOTHIE  
METAL STRAWS

\$12, [mtlstrw.ca](http://mtlstrw.ca)

### KITCHEN STORAGE



KORKEN GLASS  
JAR WITH LID

\$4, [ikea.com](http://ikea.com)

### BEACH TOYS



THREE-PIECE  
METAL SAND TOYS

\$33, [themontessorioroom.com](http://themontessorioroom.com)

Its presence has been well-documented in cottage country as well. Earlier this year, the journal *Nature* published a global study of 38 freshwater lakes and reservoirs, which found that many contained greater concentrations of microplastics than the famous oceanic gyres, such as the Great Pacific Garbage Patch. Two Muskoka-area lakes—Dickie Lake and the coincidentally named Plastic Lake—were included in the study. “The results show that freshwater systems are not just a transport pathway for plastics to the ocean,” according to Brittany Welsh, a PhD student in environmental and life sciences at Trent University, who was involved in the study. “They are also a reservoir, meaning they can store and accumulate plastic.”

All of this plastic isn’t just taking up space. It alters the chemistry of water bodies, disrupts hormones and biological processes when ingested by animals, and has been linked to a host of human health problems, including infertility, heart disease, and cancer. Plastic pollution is often considered by environmental advocates as second only to climate-warming greenhouse-gas emissions in terms of the threat posed to nature and society. So it stands to reason that, just as with climate change, there’s been a push to address the problem with a global solution.

That push is coming to fruition. In 2017, the United Nations launched the Clean Seas campaign (#CleanSeas), to tackle plastic marine litter. That effort soon snowballed into the idea of a global plastic charter—an international agreement aiming to do for plastic pollution what the 2015 Paris Agreement aims to do for greenhouse gases.

In 2022, representatives from 160 countries met in Uruguay for the first round of negotiations. Another meeting in France this past spring brought together the same group—dubbed the Intergovernmental Negotiating Committee (INC). They left those talks with a mandate to create a “Zero Draft” of the treaty, a skeletal document outlining the basic goals that the member states plan to flesh out in subsequent versions. Three more rounds of INC talks are scheduled, in Kenya, in Canada, and in South Korea. A treaty is expected to be finalized in 2024,

creating new and binding global regulations on plastic products of all kinds.

But what this will mean for Canadians—at home, at the cottage, or anywhere else—remains uncertain. The most recent round of INC talks listed 12 “possible core obligations” that could end up in the final treaty. They include improved recycling and waste management, prohibiting easily avoidable and single-use products, and even implementing a moratorium that will reduce the amount of new plastic being made.

But when the treaty does take effect, possibly as early as 2025, the impacts are likely to be modest, at least at first. Talia Gordner, an environmental lawyer with McMillan LLP in Toronto, represents clients including plastic product manufacturers and retailers. She suspects that we’re unlikely to see outright bans any time soon, except of single-use and disposable items. “In Canada, you probably will see improved labelling requirements to let consumers know what’s recyclable,” she says, “as well as the recyclable content in these products increasing.” She also anticipates a greater focus on what’s known as extended producer responsibility, or EPR, a waste-management philosophy in which the producers of a product plan for its end of life from the get-go, assuming the responsibility and expense associated with recycling or reuse.

Many of these changes—especially banning single-use products—are already on the way in Canada, thanks to federal and provincial legislation. Plastic grocery bags, stir sticks, and plastic take-out food packaging of all kinds will be banned nationwide as of the end of this year. Ring carriers for drinks and plastic straws will follow by the beginning of next summer. More is likely to come.

But not everyone puts much faith in recycling and EPR to get an effective handle on the plastic problem. Sabaa Khan is the director of climate solutions with the David Suzuki Foundation in Montreal, and to her—and to most environmental advocates—what’s really needed is to reduce the production of virgin plastics. “We’re just not able to collect and absorb the amount of plastics that are being pumped into the environment,” she says. “When you hear there will be more



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recycled content in plastics, that's good in a limited way, but that's not a long-term solution. We want to put a plug in the flow of plastic.”

The reason activists are keen on production caps rather than recycling is that plastic recycling, by and large, has been a failure—less than 10 per cent of Canadian plastic waste is recycled. That's not simply because Canadians aren't sorting their recyclables. Plastic is difficult to recycle, for a few reasons. First, plastic that's dirty or contaminated can't be recycled into new product. Secondly, it can't be kept in a loop forever. Plastic degrades every time it's recycled, meaning it must be “down-cycled” into lower quality products. A plastic bottle, for example, can't be turned into another bottle. Instead, it may be incorporated into composite lumber, and end up in a street bench, or turned into a synthetic fibre, such as fleece. After that, it's likely to end up in a landfill. But perhaps the biggest problem is simply that there isn't enough money in recycling. Collecting, sorting, and processing plastic is expensive; if the end product is low-value, it's often not worth it. The recycling industry is a business. If there's no profit to be made, ostensibly recyclable plastics will still end up in a landfill.

That's why groups such as Greenpeace and the David Suzuki Foundation, among

others, are calling for the UN treaty to impose a hard cap and phase-out of virgin plastics. But it will be a difficult sell to the industry, which is already lobbying international governments to focus instead on the “downstream” side of production—i.e. recycling and waste management. Canada's environment minister, Steven Guilbeault, admitted this June that getting enough nations on board with production cuts will be hard to do for just this reason.

Still, there are reasons to be optimistic that the treaty will indeed have far-reaching impacts. The INC has already decided that the entire lifecycle of plastic has to be addressed by the treaty, and hard caps on new plastic production are now under discussion.

“The only real solution is less plastic,” says Sarah King of Greenpeace, “so we're calling for a cap and phase down across all sectors, with an immediate focus on the most problematic and polluting ones.”

That means the plastics used in durable and long-lasting goods—say, kayaks or fishing gear—are not likely to be banned. Though that doesn't mean they won't be affected at all: the INC is also discussing the possibility of mandating greater transparency and even labelling about what kinds of chemical additives, such as colourants, lubricants,

and flame retardants, are included in plastic products. These can accumulate in the environment and interact with each other in unpredictable ways.

The final shape of the treaty is far from settled, but the direction is clear. There is bad news, of course: more plastic than ever exists in the world, and even if we stopped production of it now, the sheer quantity of it means it will continue to accumulate in the environment for years to come. The good news, though, is that the INC treaty is ambitious and potentially transformative. And as the scientific understanding of plastic's harms grow, so does the push-back against its proliferation.

“Remember, at one point, Canada shipped asbestos all over the world, before we understood its harms,” says Sabaa Khan. She believes that one day, maybe soon, we'll reach that point with plastic. “Since the end of the Second World War we've been using plastics constantly, without any end-of-life solution. Plastic replaced materials that were less harmful but did the same job, and finally we're beginning to look at turning back the clock on plastic.”

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