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My turn: Rethink plastics - envisioning a healthier Alaska

I am a member of Alaska Youth for Environmental Action (AYEA), which has seven chapters and 1,200 members throughout the state. AYEA is a high school environmental education and leadership program of the National Wildlife Federation. Our mission is to inspire, educate, and take action on environmental issues facing our communities.

Plastics pollute our land, oceans and waterways. Look around, it's everywhere. From airplane wings to iPod cords to grocery bags ... About those bags: Disposable plastic bags are a staple of 21st century life. They are useful and you get them for free. What's not to like? Plastic is the most common marine debris material. And this debris is a long-term problem. Plastic products never biodegrade; they photo-degrade. This means they break down into minuscule bits but never go away. Fish and wildlife can ingest these particles and die. This is worrisome because so many Alaskans fish and hunt for recreation or subsistence.

Charlee Lockwood from Saint Michael Village talks about problems her community has had with plastics: "I am from a village that can't afford to recycle and has a poor technique of dumping garbage. The dump is right behind the hill, and when they burn the trash to make more room, and the wind is blowing from the north, it goes all over town and smells bad."

Alaskans, and Americans, use a lot of plastic. For example, Americans use 2.5 million plastic bottles every hour. Seabirds and other wildlife are washing up entangled in things like plastic nets, bottle caps and other scraps of plastic.

Plastic is made from oil, a petroleum product. Much of our oil comes from other countries. When we depend on plastic, we are also depending on foreign oil.

Brittany Walker from Anchorage sums it up like this: "The problem with plastic is that we use too much of it. We take advantage of this resource and abuse it highly." We all contribute to the problem with plastics, but we can all contribute to the solution as well. Using less plastic, and throwing away less, is a start.

First rethink: Decide what plastic products you can do without. Can you use cloth bags for shopping instead of plastic ones? Can you fill up an old water bottle with soda at home, instead of buying from a vending machine?

Then reduce: take action. When you buy things in bulk it not only has less packaging, it costs less. Invest in reusable products like cloth grocery bags, reusable water bottles and reusable food packaging - then remember to use them.

Reuse. We all slip sometimes; if you end up with a disposable water bottle use it again and again until it falls apart. If you end up with plastic grocery bags use them for packing other things in.

Finally, recycle. If your community has a recycling center, you should drop your plastics off there. You can also drop off plastic bags at many grocery stores.

AYEA leaders initiated a yearlong campaign in November 2007 called "R3 Rethink Plastics," meaning that we must Reduce, Reuse and Recycle but also totally rethink how we use plastics in our lives. We envision a healthier Alaska with less plastic in our environment. Our goal is to reduce plastics in our communities through education and action.

Please participate in AYEAs campaign to stop the overuse of plastic. Take action. Rethink your plastic use and reduce, reuse and recycle in your home and business. Reducing your plastic waste will help Alaska's wildlife, help the environment and will save you money. So do the right thing - for Alaska and yourself.

• Zoe Fuller, 15, is the Vice Chair of AYEAs Mat-Su Valley Chapter and Chair of the Statewide Plastics Campaign. She can be reached at plastics@ayea.org.

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