

# Why Straw Bans Don't Help the Environment and Needlessly Restrict Freedom

Of all the consumer products one might have expected to become a flashpoint for political controversy, the humble plastic drinking straw is an unlikely contender. Leap into the headlines it has, though, with communities like Seattle and San Francisco recently [enacting bans](#) on disposable straws. The city council of Santa Barbara, California, initially voted for a ban that would have punished restaurant workers with up to six months of jail time for giving out a disposable plastic straw, but city officials [agreed to revisit](#) the ordinance when it appeared to also ban the sale of straws at supermarkets.

Fortunately, we can depend on our friends at Reason TV and my colleague [Angela Logomasini](#) for some commonsense analysis. As Angela points out in [the video above](#), the case against the plastic straw is exceedingly weak. There aren't as many plastic straws thrown away as claimed, and only a tiny portion of U.S. straws end up anywhere near the oceans—the vast majority of municipal solid waste in this country ends up either [buried in landfills, recycled, or burned up in incinerators](#), far from any [congested sea turtles](#).

The vast majority of plastic waste in oceans actually comes not from advanced countries like the U.S. but from [countries like China and Indonesia](#) that consume a large volume of plastic products but lack our modern waste collection infrastructure. Much of their plastic waste ends up washed into major river systems that empty into the oceans. A [study](#) published last year in the journal *Environment Science & Technology* by three German researchers [found that](#) 90 percent of the plastic debris found in the world's oceans is dumped there by just ten of the world's rivers—none of which are in the Western Hemisphere, much less the United States.

## Plastic Free Is a Luxury

Beside the fact that U.S. consumers are contributing very little to the ostensible problem is the other side of the equation: the benefits of the straws themselves. I suspect many Americans who were initially receptive to the idea of a ban were genuinely surprised to learn that disposable drinking straws are very important to [people with certain disabilities](#). British disability rights activist Penny Pepper [recently commented](#) in the *Guardian* about how she depends on plastic straws—and other single-use, disposable products like baby wipes—writing “I don’t have the luxury of a plastic-free life.” The durability, convenience, cleanliness, low price, and resistance to heat of disposable plastic straws make them irreplaceable to people with many different physical limitations.

Not everyone’s need for convenience is as specific and pressing as Ms. Pepper’s, but it shouldn’t have to be. Giving disabled Americans an “opt-out” of a plastic straw ban would certainly be better than no accommodation at all, but it gets the presumption of a free society backward. Absent causing some real harm—and a straw that ends up buried in a landfill on the edge of town doesn’t meet that threshold—we should be free to eat, drink, and slurp as we see fit. No one should

have to get a license or undergo an exam to qualify for access to a simple consumer product. Does anyone really believe that empowering public officials to decide who is allowed to have plastic utensils and disposable hygiene products will yield positive results?

No one wants to see sea creatures suffer, but we passed the point long ago at which the debate over plastic straws had anything to do with aquatic wildlife, and are now living amidst a spectacle of [virtue-signaling celebrities](#) repeating debunked talking points originally popularized by [a 9-year old's science project](#). Every one of us is free to eschew a straw if we don't want to use one, and we should be equally free to help ourselves to one if we do.

If you really care about sea turtles, by the way, consider donating to the rescue and rehabilitation facilities of [Sea Turtle Inc.](#) in South Padre Island, Texas. According to their website, they don't receive any government funding.

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