

Are Plastic Straws the New Smoking?

Plastic straw bans are taking America by storm. Local governments across the country are jumping on the band wagon. Last week, the [Washington Post](#) shadowed a health inspector visiting D.C. restaurants to see if they were complying with the city's new ban.

The most revealing quote in the article came from Julie Lawson, director of D.C. Mayor Muriel E. Bowser's Office of the Clean City:

Single-use plastics are taking the same cultural place as tobacco where it's socially unacceptable.

She's exactly right. Let's start with smoking. It's unhealthy, sometimes fatal. It wastes money. But the same things are true of many human behaviors. Yet somehow smoking got singled out for a governmental and societal fury that knew no parallel – until now.

The *Washington Post* makes clear that straws are a relatively small problem:

City officials estimate that plastic straws make up less than 1 percent of the trash in the Anacostia and Potomac rivers.

[Globally](#), straws make up just 0.025 percent of the plastic in the oceans.

So these bans are like using a bazooka to take out a mouse. The government of Washington, D.C., is deploying three inspectors to visit restaurants, snooping for plastic straws. Right now, they're just handing out warning letters. When the grace period ends in July, they'll be issuing fines of up to \$800. Look for more inspectors to be hired if this becomes a

significant source of revenue for the district.

And it's not just politicians who are heaping disdain on plastic straws. Virtue signalers across America are taking this on as their new crusade.

I don't smoke. But several years ago, I sat at an outdoor café in Annapolis, MD, with a friend from Europe who lit up. I was amazed at the nasty looks random passersby shot at her and the dramatic show they made of giving her a wide berth.

Plastic straws are coming in for the same treatment. An acquaintance of mine manages a restaurant. She told me they stock only compostable straws but even then she hides them under the counter. If her customers – who she describes as “rich old hippies”- see them, they complain.

I have two small children, and they usually drink with straws. This is much easier for them and reduces spills. When we're out at restaurants, I'm actually afraid to ask for straws. For some reason if a restaurant doesn't stock straws, the staff aren't content to just tell me that. They also have to toss their heads and give me contemptuous looks.

Like many bans imposed by governments throughout human history, D.C.'s prohibition on straws has already had the opposite of its intended effect. Existing supplies of plastic straws are getting dumped in large numbers. According to the *Washington Post*:

“On the first day the law took effect, a Starbucks store downtown threw away large bags filled with straws, a move that seemed to defeat the purpose of the ban.”

Perhaps there's a business idea here: an app to sell your back stock of plastic straws. I know I'd be interested. They are becoming increasingly hard to find in stores.

I tried buying my kids reusable straws a while ago, but they were hard to clean. Despite my best efforts, they quickly developed a nasty smell. So I switched back to plastic. However, I always rinse out our straws and reuse them as often as possible. Isn't that approach far more reasonable than a ban?

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