People Versus Plastics Podcast:

An extended version

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Global pollution seems to be a multifaceted problem that we, as humans, are nowhere close to figuring out. There are many sources that factor in the pollution issue and one of the primary sources are garbage waste. Much of this garbage waste that fills the landfills and even oceans are plastic based items. Although the plastic pandemic seems to be one of the more critical facets of global pollution, often it is not the most publicized. Having this knowledge, myself and four other classmates decided to create a research podcast on the subject of plastics and how they impact the environment. Our group believed our podcast to be very productive and informative, but also saw some areas for improving how we got our message across.

In order to best inform the listeners, our group decided to break the issue of plastic pollution down into a few smaller concepts that we would each explain and elaborate on. The first and most relevant information we discussed was what happens to discarded plastics. In these sections, we discussed where the plastic itself goes and what happens to a specific plastic item. From there, we talked about the ramifications of this plastic overload and how it affects the plants and animals and therefore us as humans. Then we debated what ideologies and mindsets allowed for the problem to become so great. Lastly, we discussed solutions to handle the massive amounts of plastic waste as well as how to reduce the amount we create in the future. Overall, our primary goal of the podcast was to spread awareness and inform listeners of the problem with plastic waste.

To understand everything about the plastic pollution issue, listeners needed to know what plastic waste includes and what exactly happens to an everyday item that one would discard.  Our podcast began with a clip that discussed a lifespan of a plastic bag. This clip shared that the lifespan of a plastic bag, such as one that might be received at a grocery store, is only around twelve minutes (Moon, R. 2018, May 05). After these twelve minutes, the discarded bag would either end up in a landfill or be swept away by winds and find its way into a body of water, most often the ocean. At this point, the bag would float until it biodegrades in somewhere close to five-hundred years. At the same time that this biodegrading process occurs, small particles of plastic are breaking off of these items and absorbing into the sea. These small pieces are called microplastics.

Microplastics can be defined as “small plastic pieces less than five millimeters long which can be harmful to our ocean and aquatic life” (US Department of Commerce, & National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration 2016, April 13). They cause the most harm when they seep into plant life inside the ocean as well as around it and when consumed by marine animals. From there, the contaminated plants and animals are eaten by us, who only begin to realize the health consequences when it becomes about our own health.

There are not very many ways to stop or slow this great health hazard that has been created. The most effective way is to look at the source of the issue, which was the area of the podcast that I focused the majority of my research. The true source of this plastic crisis lies within the culture and actions we take when it comes to everyday plastic products. The term throwaway culture can be described as a society over-influenced by consumerism and one that overproduces short-lived disposable items (National Geographic 2018, June 06). The majority of the items we use on a daily basis contain some form of plastic, and in many cases, these items are used just a single time before being discarded. This type of plastic consumption would not be an issue for small numbers of people, but when seven billion people continue to buy and use plastic products that are immediately discarded the planet begins to see the consequences.

The best option to address the problem is to stop using these single-use plastic items altogether. Once these plastic items are taken out, it becomes easy to see that there are not very many alternatives. The reasoning behind this lack of options falls the idea of planned obsolescence. Planned obsolescence can be understood as the idea that everyday consumer goods be made slowly unusable so that they become obsolete and must be rebought or fixed (economist.com 2009, March 23). When products are designed this way, they become massively profitable as millions or billions of people will not only buy a product, but continue to buy or pay for the same product over and over again. As an example, the corporate giant Apple was just named in a class-action lawsuit after they admitted to intentionally slowing down older versions of their products in order to motivate consumers to buy another. Plastic products fall into this ongoing issue because of its cheap price and easy manipulation.

Companies and other organizations need to become more efficient in developing, as well as making readily available, these alternatives to plastics. Should the cycle of planned obsolescence continue, plastic cannot be a part of it. Items such as plastic straws are perfect examples of the process that needs to change. Hundreds of thousands of plastic straws can be found in the ocean annually, and their lifespans of usage are only minutes. Some companies have developed an alternative through the creation of paper straws and reusable metal straws. When used on a broad and global scale, paper straws could make a noticeable difference in the plastic pollution totals, but the change will not fully solve the problem. Plastic utensils are yet another detrimental example of planned obsolescence within plastic products. People intentionally buy plastic utensils in order to save them the trouble of doing dishes, as utensils are thrown out directly after use. Silverware and paper utensils could easily replace these utensils. This simple switch could lessen plastic consumption and waste significantly, as one person alone usually uses at least three utensils per meal. There needs to be a complete changeover from plastic-based single-use items to more environmentally friendly items if the plastic pandemic is to be slowed and hopefully, at some point stopped.

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