

NEPA Urges Jamaicans to Refuse, Reduce, Reuse and Recycle Plastics

Saturday, September 21, 2024, saw hundreds of Jamaicans volunteering to clear our shores of wastes in observance of International Coastal Cleanup Day (ICCD). An annual event on the National Environment and Planning Agency's (NEPA) calendar, ICCD continues to highlight a very clear and present danger - marine litter. A main culprit - plastic.

This material continues to be a major pollutant of Jamaica's waters. NEPA, with its mandate of managing and protecting Jamaica's land, wood, air and water, is at the forefront of efforts to rid our waterways of plastic waste. Each year, the Agency lends support to the Jamaica Environment Trust, national coordinator for ICCD, in organizing beach cleanups. At NEPA's main cleanup site at Shipwreck Beach along the Palisadoes, 623 volunteers removed 571 bags of wastes weighing approximately 2507 kilogrammes or 5,527 pounds from approximately 1 kilometre of coastline. Of that number, 247 bags were recyclable wastes, and 324 bags were non-recyclables.

Why should Jamaicans care about plastic pollution?

Plastic, unlike other materials, is not biodegradable and can take up to 1,000 years to break down. As such, it remains a threat to the environment after discarding. It has a disastrous effect on human and marine life, from habitat destruction, including smothering the seabed, to microplastic intrusion in foods and ultimately in humans.

The destruction of marine habitats means a reduction in our fish stock for consumption and for the sustained economic livelihood of fisherfolk. Plastic also chokes mangroves which serve to protect coastal areas from flooding, a vital function especially in light of rising sea levels and more severe weather conditions due to climate change.

Single-use plastic ban

The need for plastic reduction is therefore urgent and is reinforced by the implementation of the 4th phase of the ban on single-use plastics in Jamaica. This phase, effective 11 July 2024, banned single-use plastic food containers made wholly or partially from polyethylene or polypropylene. The government first made the move towards reducing single-use plastics in 2019 by imposing a ban on the importation, manufacturing and distribution of single-use plastic bags, drinking straws, and expanded polystyrene foam food containers used in the food and beverage industry.

What can you do?

The ban ushered in a new dawn in environmental management and protection. As such, #PlasticBanJA was born and with it, the 4Rs; **refuse, reduce, reuse and recycle**. You can play your part and join NEPA in ridding Jamaica of plastic pollution by adopting these four small changes.

1. Refuse - Bring Your Own Bag or Bottle

Bring Your Own Bag or Bottle (B.Y.O.B) for shopping and outdoor use is a simple way to *reduce* single-use plastic usage. Choose from various bags, including paper and cloth, and metal reusable bottles.

2. Reuse - Replace disposable plastic utensils with non-plastic alternatives

At present, single-use plastic utensils are not banned in Jamaica. Nevertheless, opt to use your own reusable utensils. *These* are available in metal, bamboo or wood and can be purchased locally.

3. Reduce - Use products with minimal packaging

Reduce the use of single-use plastic packaging in supermarkets by purchasing minimal products or using net or mesh bags for fruits and vegetables.

4. Recycle - Use recyclable materials for projects

Here's one for parents, teachers and children. Use *recycled* materials for homework and school and art projects. Plastic containers can be transformed into bottle cars and trucks, while seed-growing activities can be taught using plastic bottles. Single-use plastic can also be upcycled for sculptures, vases, pencil holders, and musical instruments.

Lessening single-use plastic dependence is key to Jamaica's survival, especially as a small island developing state battling climate change issues. The ban on single-use plastics requires everyone to play their part. As Jamaica looks forward to a better, more ecologically safe environment, join NEPA and support the plastic ban!



Gaynstead High School Cadets doing their part to remove bags of wastes that littered the Shipwreck Beach at Palisadoes in Kingston.



Volunteers from the Scientific Research Council show off their haul of garbage from the Shipwreck Beach clean-up site

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