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Op-ED | USVI Must Tackle Plastic Waste and Toxic Sunscreen Issues Now

Opinion / **Published On February 18, 2022 06:40 AM /**

Staff Consortium **February 18, 2022**

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Harith Wickrema, President, Island Green Living By. PROVIDED

“Microplastics, microbeads and single-use plastics (are) poisoning sea life and affecting humans. Each year, an estimated eight million tons of plastic end up in the ocean – equivalent to a full garbage truck dumped into the sea every minute.”

– United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP)

In 2016, the United Nations adopted Sustainable Development Goal 14 (Life Below Water), focusing on the urgent need to tackle ocean plastic pollution. A Special Envoy for the Ocean was appointed by the Secretary-General in 2017, underscoring its importance.

In 2021, the U.N. launched “Decade of Ocean Science for Sustainable Development,” which addresses ocean plastic pollution. The upcoming U.N. Ocean Conference in Lisbon will confront the issue as well.

Plastic waste is on the agendas for the G7 and G20, with pressure from environmental organizations to adopt a global treaty on plastic pollution. Many countries, especially island nations and those that rely on sun/sand/sea tourism are already developing stringent goals, strategies, and laws to stem the tide and mitigate a possible “tsunami effect” of plastic pollution on their oceans and beaches.

All the above sends a clear message: Single-use plastic pollution must be controlled.

Despite the valiant efforts of WMA, we have long faced challenges with regard to managing our waste. Inadequate infrastructure and lack of funds, municipal source separation, composting and mandatory recycling have been huge obstacles, especially considering our near capacity landfills.

Island Green Living, along with other like-minded groups and environmentalists, has been fighting for positive change. We helped craft the source separation & container deposit bills. When WMA tried to enforce the plastic bag ban, one supermarket chain sued.

Today many stores offer green plastic bags stating that they are compostable. However they are only compostable in a municipal composting setting, which doesn’t exist here. Under the guise of being green, businesses hand out plastic bags that end up on our beaches, in the ocean and landfill.

Let me pose a question to our businesses that depend on our tourism based economy: Why do tourists choose to visit the US Virgin Islands.

Mainly because of our pristine beaches and aqua blue clear waters with a plethora of marine life such as turtles, sting rays, octopus, fish and the most spectacular multicolor coral. Snorkeling, diving, boating and swimming are among the most popular activities for tourists. As residents, we value these things as well.

Just imagine if we became like some beaches in Bali, Cambodia, Vietnam, Philippines, etc. – polluted with plastic bags and other debris. Dead coral and marine life due to unchecked irresponsible behavior including the use of toxic sunscreen containing oxybenzone and other dangerous chemicals.

As a tourism based economy, if we do not protect our valuable natural resources, we will not have tourists. I have never met a tourist who would fly to see dead coral, plastic littered beaches, a brown oil slick sheen on the ocean, or turtles with tumors and plastic around their necks. When tourists go fishing and bring fish back to cook – the last thing they want is to find plastic inside the fish’s belly. **AND NEITHER DO THE REST OF US!**

So we say to the businesses in USVI: think beyond this year’s profits. If you want tourists to keep coming, take matters into your own hands and discourage single use plastics. Stop selling toxic sunscreen, educate tourists on “do’s and don’ts” such as no smoking on our beaches, no touching and feeding wild animals, etc.

We can all make a difference. Island Green is pleased to announce our new Ocean-Bound Plastics Recycling Program, which will collect #1, 2 and 5 single-use plastics on St. John for recycling through PADNOS, a Michigan-based recycling company. This includes items such as water and soda bottles, detergent and milk jugs, jars, etc. It is vital to emphasize that recycling should be the

LAST step. RETHINK before you purchase single-use plastic. If there is no other option, REDUCE wherever possible. Next REUSE existing plastic and finally – RECYCLE.

If we had our way, there would be zero single-use plastics to contend with – but in the meantime, our program aims to mitigate so these items are recycled into valuable products rather than polluting the sea or burdening our landfills. The initiative complements our existing Aluminum Can Recycling Program which has, to date, taken more than 1.2 million cans out of the waste stream. The community can drop off plastics as well as aluminum at our St. John location and additionally, we will soon be launching regular pick-ups with dedicated bins at key WMA sites across the island.

In addition to reduction of single use plastics and mandatory source separation, we must introduce green/eco curriculum that touches on agriculture/food security, renewable energy and recycling. As a member of the Governor's Agricultural Plan Task Force, we recommended 44 new teachers be hired to achieve this.

Governor Bryan, with your vision to increase food production, renewable energy, EVs, and expand sustainable waste management, a key tool is to introduce this PreK-12 curriculum. Collaboration between Departments of Education, Agriculture, Office of Energy and UVI, would be among the most effective tools you have in your arsenal to preserve our islands and the environment.

There are many federal and private grant funds available to tackle our environmental issues. Let us invest in a team of professional grant writers perhaps even collaborating with UVI.

Governor, please help us to educate businesses, residents and tourists on sustainability. And insist the Department of Tourism educate tourists about our toxic sunscreen law so visitors know to use only safe mineral sunscreen. It has been almost two years since the ban went into effect and there is still not a word about it on their website or in marketing.

Delegate Plaskett, we appreciate your focus on climate change issues. Please help by introducing a national toxic sunscreen ban.

Senate President Frett-Gregory, please help by passing Styrofoam and single-use plastic amenities bans, as well as EV vs fossil fuel vehicle importation guidelines.

There are many individuals and organizations doing amazing work in the islands and they are an inspiration to us all. Together, in collaboration as a team, we can do this. Let's make USVI an example to be emulated.

Submitted on Thursday by: *Harith Wickrema, President, Island Green Living*