

From Single Use to Systems Change: A Call to Action

Our planet is fragile, and experiencing a dual crisis of runaway climate change and unprecedented biodiversity loss. Global temperature rise may already have passed a point of no return due to escalating CO₂ levels in the Earth's atmosphere, and the decline and loss of species globally means the web of life is unravelling faster than we can repair it.

Forest and ocean ecosystems are fundamental to the health of our planet and our survival. Forests provide up to 30 per cent of the carbon reductions required to stabilize our climate,¹ and are home to 80 per cent of the world's terrestrial biodiversity²; forests purify our air and water, and provide a buffer against disease. Oceans store vast amounts of carbon dioxide and act as natural solutions to climate change, and they provide rich, complex ecosystems for marine life that also provide billions of people with food and livelihoods.

Yet as we continue to consume natural resources at an unsustainable rate, the resilience of these precious ecosystems is fundamentally undermined.

Since the 1970s our consumption of single use, disposable products have skyrocketed, largely due to growing consumerism, and a culture of convenience. We produce 2 billion tonnes of waste each year and this figure is projected to increase by 70 per cent by 2050³. Single use products are a key contributor to this: when not effectively recycled, they are burned, sent to dumpsites or landfills, or simply left to degrade our environment and poison our oceans.

From cradle to grave, single use products leave behind a legacy of negative environmental impacts that humanity and the earth's resources can simply not afford.

Equally important, their production and disposal are disproportionately harming indigenous communities, people of colour and vulnerable populations whose territories and homes are often situated close to production regions and plants, or waste sites of extractive industries.

The use of both plastic and paper for single use products causes significant and lasting environmental harm that we urgently need to address. Of the 300 million tonnes of plastic produced each year, half of that goes into single use products and applications⁴. Since plastic is derived from fossil fuel extraction and manufacturing, its very production contributes to greenhouse gas emissions. The life cycle of paper-based single use products derived from trees is similarly devastating, and yet often under-estimated. Carbon released in the logging process contributes to greenhouse gas emissions, and the removal of natural

¹ <https://www.un.org/esa/forests/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/UNFF14-BkgdStudy-SDG13- March2019.pdf>

² <https://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/biodiversity/>

³ <https://sensoneo.com/sensoneo-global-waste-index-2019/>

⁴ <https://www.nrdc.org/stories/single-use-plastics-101>

forests eliminate the ability of those forests to continue to mitigate against climate change. Each year, three billion trees are cut down to make paper packaging⁵, and that's projected to increase by 20 per cent over the next five years⁶.

Less than 10 percent of all the plastics ever produced has been recycled⁷, and a mere four percent of that has been recycled back into products of the same quality as the original. When it ends up in oceans or scattered on land, plastic waste breaks down into microplastics, infinitely tiny toxic pieces that are ingested by species of all kinds, including humans with untold health consequences. Both paper and plastics manufacturing are chemically intensive, energy-intensive, and require large amounts of water - and the reality is, eliminating the majority of single use products immediately will help conserve irreplaceable resources.

There are notable exceptions when single use commodities may be the most appropriate product, in particular in health care and in some scientific research industries. The overwhelming majority of single use products, especially throwaway packaging can, however, be eliminated or phased out quickly, and replaced with circular systems that promote re-use and reduction.

To achieve the goals set out in the Paris Agreement and the Aichi Biodiversity Targets, and in recognition of universal human rights, there needs to be a collective shift in the way we design and manufacture products to avoid waste. Many of the solutions needed to make a waste-free and regenerative society already exist, but the pace and scale of change needs to escalate dramatically.

We therefore call for an end to single use, throwaway commodities, and call for transformational change to our production, consumption and end-of-use systems to enable a truly circular economy. This will require commitments and effective collaboration from government, business, financial institutions and investors, the non-profit sector, and civil society.

Accordingly, we call on all relevant bodies to:

- **Re-direct:** public and private funds to support the start-up and scale-up of systems that support reusable products and circularity, and disincentivize continuation of single use commodities by increasing levies and taxes on those products and the systems that prop them up.

- **Re-design to support:**
 - **Responsible material lifecycles:** Ensure that the life cycle of the materials and products we use – from extraction and production, to end use, recycling, composting, and disposal – sustain the health of the people and the planet.

⁵ <https://canopyplanet.org/campaigns/pack4good/>

⁶ <https://www.futuremarketinsights.com/reports/paper-packaging-market>

⁷ <https://www.unenvironment.org/interactive/beat-plastic-pollution/>

- **Responsible and clean production:** Ensure producers take responsibility for the full life cycle costs and impacts of their products and packaging, and redesign and innovate better products from renewable, safe and sustainable feedstocks and move towards systems that facilitate circularity.
- **Responsible consumption:** reject single-use products in favour of reusable ones made with the lowest possible environmental and social footprint.
- **Reward innovation:** to help scale-up lasting solutions that are widely adopted and benefit both people and the planet.
- **Reparation for damage:** recognize and accept responsibility for harm caused recently and historically by the production and consumption of single use products, in particular, to indigenous peoples and people of colour, who are often disproportionately affected by modern extractive and pollutive industries.
- **Restore:** degraded natural habitats that have been impacted as a result of the production and disposal of products and packaging, whilst recognizing the important role that local and indigenous communities play in conservation and restoration. Protect and promote sustainable use of forest and marine ecosystems to enable a circular economy supported by closed-loop regenerative feedstocks.

Call to Action Signatories: