

Circular economy requires cultural change

Written by **Clare Moody** on 25 June 2015 in **Opinion**

Discarded plastic has devastating effects on our marine environment, but changing waste into a resource could help limit the damage, writes Clare Moody.



Earlier this month, I joined constituents from Cornwall, in the west of my region, for a meeting with European environment, maritime affairs and fisheries commissioner Karmenu Vella, during which they showed him a 100m section of a bottle-top chain which was originally over 1km long.

The chain is made from an estimated 65,000 plastic bottle-tops, collected in just 12 weeks by volunteers along Cornwall's beaches. It provides a startling visualisation of how severe the environmental threat posed by marine plastics has become in recent years and why the commission's circular economy proposals must prove a success.

How we mitigate the threat that plastics pose to our marine environment is one of the most important questions of our time, with serious implications for our wildlife now and for future generations.

It is an issue that threatens coastlines around my region, from Bournemouth to Penzance and St Ives to the Severn estuary, the rest of Britain, and all of Europe. It is not, therefore, an issue that one community, local authority or national government can tackle on its own.

It is a sad reality that plastic bottle-tops are only the tip of an iceberg. The chain itself was made of only the bottle tops, not all the additional pieces of plastic that were collected.

Research by academics from Plymouth university, in my region, show that many more discarded items actually degrade into 'microplastics'; billions of microscopic plastic pieces, capable of causing physical and toxicological harm to a range of marine organisms.

Marine ornithologists have found, for example, that 95 per cent of the northern Fulmar population has now ingested plastics of some type.

As a solution to the problem, 'cleaning up' is no longer feasible. Instead, the problem needs to be tackled at source, by identifying and eliminating major contributors.

Furthermore, if we reimagine waste as a resource - by reusing, repairing, refurbishing, and recycling existing products - we reduce the impact this waste has on our environment.

As the name implies, the circular economy is about changing our perception of product-life entirely, to move from a linear product use to a product that experiences many uses, better valuing the original resource (eight per cent of oil production is used to make plastic items) used in manufacture and avoiding the damaging and toxic consequences of outdated single product use.

Previous circular economy proposals were withdrawn by the commission last year, against parliament's wishes, with the promise that a more effective package will be introduced. New proposals are expected later this year.

The hard truth is that to achieve the necessary outcomes we need cultural change, and this means ambitious targets, across the EU. It means all actors, from member states to manufacturers to consumers, must be on board with the proposals.

Real change will need action on a range of fronts, to promote responsibility among plastics producers, to improve the recyclability of products, to set higher standards for recycling, and to change consumers' attitudes towards recycling and making it easier for them to do so.

All the research and development, all the design and effort that goes into manufacturing plastic products is wasted if they're simply thrown away - when we know there is no 'away'. For change to happen, we must have consensus.

After the meeting with commissioner Vella and my constituents, I am optimistic that we could see real change - this problem can only get worse if something substantial isn't done now.

About the author

Clare Moody (Progressive Alliance of the Socialists and Democrats, UK) is a substitute member of parliament's industry