

People are a vital part of the Chesapeake Bay ecosystem. Actions we take today can revive the Bay's health tomorrow and into the future.

Reduce Use of Disposable Plastic Eating Utensils

Plastic cutlery is everywhere, and most of it can be used only once. Billions of plastic forks, knives, and spoons are thrown away each year.¹ Like other plastic items—such as bags and bottles—plastic utensils can take centuries to break down, giving the plastic waste ample time to work its way into the environment and our water. The Ocean Conservancy lists plastic cutlery as among the items most deadly to sea turtles, birds, and mammals.²

What You Can Do to Help

Saying no to plastic utensils when ordering take-out, stowing an extra set of tableware in your bag or car, or treating yourself and family members to reusable utensils for on-the-go eating are some easy ways to help reduce the production and use of plastic utensils.

Studies show that concerted communication efforts to encourage people to stop or minimize using disposable plastic utensils work. Just the simple act of reducing your use of plastic utensils can result in less landfill waste and fewer toxic chemicals being released into the environment and ending up in the Chesapeake watershed.³

Here are some of the positive environmental benefits of reducing use of disposable plastic utensils.

1. Helps reduce climate change.

Plastic cutlery causes environmental harm even before it gets to your table. The production of plastic for utensils is an intensive energy and materialistic process, having a large environmental impact for the amount of product generated.⁴ Using reusable utensils reduces the demand for plastic utensils and leads to fewer single-use utensils being manufactured, which helps combat climate change.

2. Avoids harming wildlife and marine life.

Plastic forks, knives, and spoons are ranked among the most harmful types of marine debris to ocean animals, and a recent leading international environmental study shows that they may be a lot more prevalent than previously suspected.⁵ It's estimated that plastic utensils might require 1,000 years to

¹ <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/environment/2019/06/carrying-your-own-fork-spoon-help-plastic-crisis/>

² <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/environment/2019/06/carrying-your-own-fork-spoon-help-plastic-crisis/>

³ <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/environment/2019/06/carrying-your-own-fork-spoon-help-plastic-crisis/>

⁴ <https://www.conserve-energy-future.com/environmental-impact-plastic-cutlery-and-solutions.php#:~:text=Plastic%20cutlery%20has%20a%20lot,and%20carbon%20to%20the%20atmosphere>

⁵ <https://www.foodandwine.com/news/plastic-utensils-straws-beaches>

degrade.⁶ In the process, tiny plastic pieces break off and end up in the soil, oceans, and stomachs of wildlife and marine life. Birds, turtles, and other marine life mistake plastic pieces for food. In recent years, a dead whale that washed ashore was found to have 13 pounds of plastic waste in its stomach. The United Nations envisions there will be more plastic than fish in the world's oceans by 2050 unless people stop using single-use plastic items such as bags, bottles, and utensils.⁷

3. Avoids harm to human health.

Most plastic utensils are made of polystyrene, which can release toxic chemicals when heated. In addition, when plastic utensils degrade, they break into microplastics and end up in our food and water. Microplastics have been detected in marine water, wastewater, fresh water, food, air, and drinking water, both bottled and tap water. Researchers estimate more than 50% of the world population might have microplastics in their fecal stools.⁸ And there's preliminary evidence that mothers may be able to pass microplastics through the placenta to a developing fetus.⁹ Plastic products were never designed to end up in our oceans and soil. Because research into microplastics is so new, there is not yet enough data on how they are affecting human health.

4. Reduces landfill waste.

Plastic utensils are not easy to recycle due to their small size, contamination, inconsistent materials, and shape. Forks, spoons, and knives fall are known to fall between the belts and gears of the machinery at the recycling facilities, causing injuries and machine failure.¹⁰ Without a pathway for reuse, the 40 billion plastic utensils used in the U.S. each year go to landfill.¹¹

Websites for More Information

- National Geographic – [Carrying Your Own Fork and Spoon Help Plastic Crisis](#)
- Penn Eco-Reps – [How To: Reduce Disposable Utensils](#)

Behavior Change Campaign Examples

It is common to find it challenging to adapt to reusable utensils or using biodegradable or compostable utensils.¹² Common barriers to change include:

- **Clean-up and convenience.** Disposable eating utensils are convenient and easy when there is not a way or time to clean up after eating (e.g., hosting a meal with many people).

⁶ <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/environment/2019/06/carrying-your-own-fork-spoon-help-plastic-crisis/>

⁷ <https://news.un.org/en/story/2017/04/556132-feature-uns-mission-keep-plastics-out-oceans-and-marine-life>

⁸ <https://time.com/5431668/microplastics-human-waste-study/>

⁹ <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2020/dec/22/microplastics-revealed-in-placentas-unborn-babies>

¹⁰ <https://apps.npr.org/plastics-recycling/>

¹¹ <https://www.forbes.com/sites/lauratenenbaum/2019/07/16/plastic-cutlery-is-terrible-for-the-environment-and-we-dont-need-to-have-it-delivered/?sh=41b4b81f4019>

¹² <https://www.indystar.com/story/news/2018/07/29/plastic-waste-pollution-people-cant-resits/818703002/>

- **Cues.** Forgetting the reusable cutlery at home.
- **Values, beliefs and motivation.** Believing this single action matters and has an impact on protecting the environment is motivating.

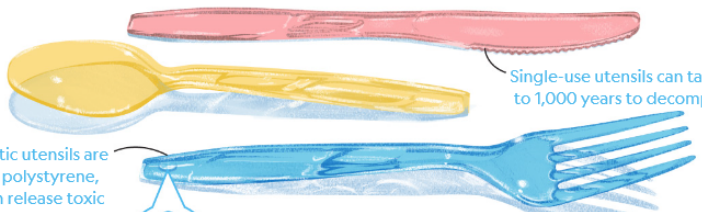
❖ National Geographic’s *Planet or Plastic* – Pledge and Social Media Campaign

National Geographic’s [Planet or Plastic?](#) is a multiyear initiative aimed at raising awareness of the impacts of single-use plastics and reducing the amount of single-use plastics that enter the world’s oceans. These efforts include the following:

- [Planet or Plastic? Pledge](#): The pledge encourages individuals to commit to reduce single-use plastic, then shows how many billions of items will be prevented from reaching the ocean as a result of these pledges. (**Commitment**)
- Social Media Campaign: an effort to spread the word on social media about the pledge and the problem with single-use plastics. (**Social Diffusion**)
- Article: [Why Carrying Your Own Fork and Spoon Helps Solve the Plastic Crisis](#) reviews the environmental impacts of disposable utensils and encourages people to bring their own fork and spoon. (**Social Norm**)


THE STORY OF PLASTIC | UTENSILS

Plastic utensils were introduced in the 1940s but did not start being mass produced until the 1950s. A decade later, along with the growth of the fast-food industry, they became widely used.




Single-use utensils can take up to 1,000 years to decompose.

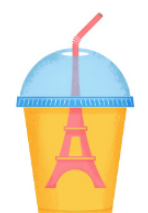
Most plastic utensils are made of polystyrene, which can release toxic chemicals when heated.



Usage
In the United States, more than 100 million plastic utensils are used every day.



Recycling
Their size, inconsistent materials, and shape make them more difficult to recycle.

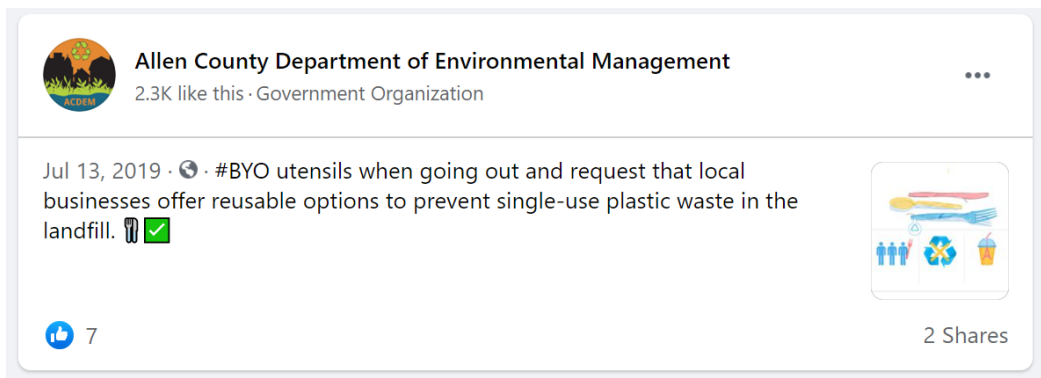
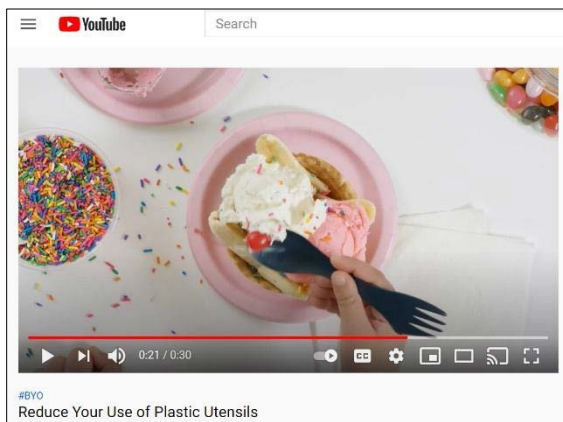


Did You Know?
France is the first country to ban plastic cutlery, plates, and cups. The ban takes effect in 2020.

MONICA SERRANO, NGM STAFF; KELSEY NOWAKOWSKI
SOURCES: PLASTIC POLLUTION COALITION; MINISTRY OF ECOLOGICAL AND SOLIDARITY TRANSITION, FRANCE; POLYMER PLASTICS; 5 GYRES

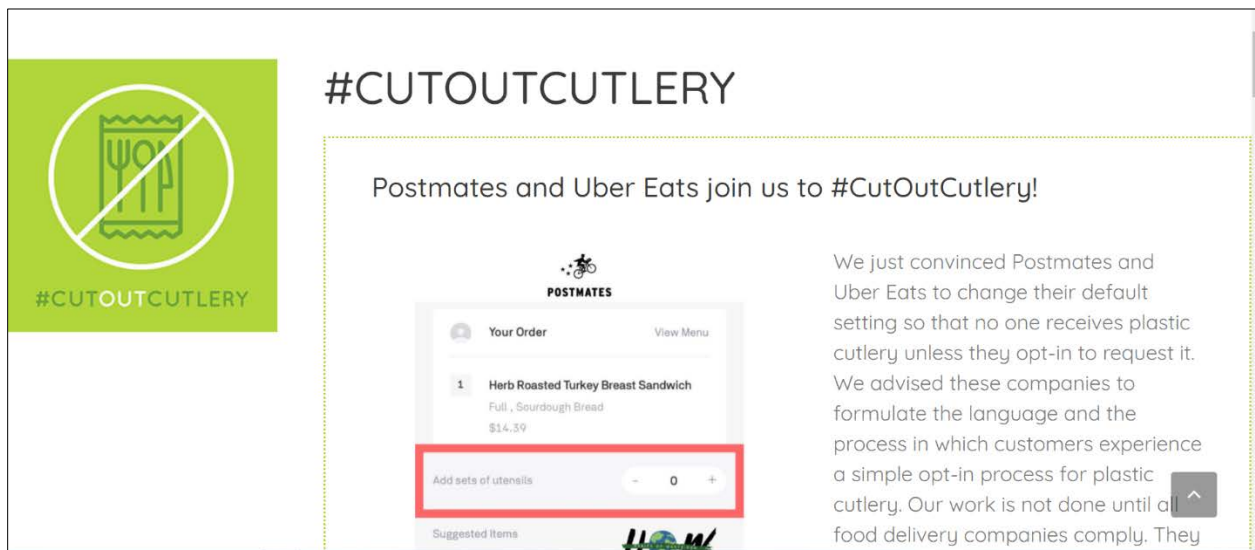
❖ Allen County, PA – BYO Utensils Campaign

Allen County Department of Environmental Management in Pennsylvania created a [#BYO Utensils campaign](#) to encourage residents to increase awareness of single-use plastics and reduce their use of disposable plastic utensils. They posted messages to Facebook and created a video. (**Social Norm**)



❖ Habits of Waste – #CUTOUTCUTLERY Campaign

The [#CUTOUTCUTLERY campaign](#) with UberEats and Postmates has adjusted their app so that single-use plastic cutlery is an option customers need to select. This makes opting out of plastic the default preference. (**Convenience**)



Example Messages

These messages about reducing the use of disposable plastic utensils could be used in congregational outreach campaigns:

1. **Oysters don't need single-use sporks, and neither do we.** Plastic litter from takeout orders is a key source of the estimated 269,000 tons of plastic pollution swept into waterways and oceans. In water over time, they partially degrade into small plastic pieces, harming marine life and affecting human health.¹³ When these materials break down enough to reach the level of microplastics, even filter feeders like oysters can consume them. (surprise; cue)
2. **Be on the cutting edge. BYO utensils.** In coming years, bringing your own utensils will be as common as bringing your own water bottle is now. Be a leader in this environmental

¹³ <https://www.plasticpollutioncoalition.org/guides-eats>

movement: use extra tableware you have at home instead of disposable plastic. Keep an extra set in your bag, car, or office. (social diffusion)

3. **Ordering take-out? Start by saying no to plastic utensils.** Plastic cutlery is one of those items that won't get recycled even when you put it in the recycling. It's too contaminated. It's too small. It's too lightweight. So those 40 billion plastic utensils per year are a complete waste.¹⁴ (cue)

Below are the benefits of reducing disposable utensils in your congregation:¹⁵

1. **Less Waste** – By using reusable cutlery instead of disposable utensils, you can reduce the number of items sent to landfill.
2. **Cut Costs** – Reducing disposable utensils (as well as dishware and cups) dramatically reduces the costs associated with consistently purchasing disposable items.
3. **Better Quality** – Non-plastic utensils are better quality as they are more resilient to stress. Have you ever tried cutting a bagel with a plastic knife? It's impossible!

The example messages could be used in various outreach strategies with your congregation, such as the following:¹⁶

- **Provide Reusable Utensils in the congregation's kitchen** – Provide utensils for your kitchen that can be washed rather than thrown away.
- **Display Signage** – Post easy to understand signs informing the congregation's members about the new silverware and reminding them to wash after use.
- **Remove Disposables** – Once stocked with reusables, consider removing disposables or post signage that says, "Disposables for Guests Only."
- **Encourage the Congregation to "BYO" Utensils** – Encourage congregational members to keep their own utensils in their purse or car so that they can use the utensils at congregational events as well as on-the-go.
- **Ask Caterers to Provide Reusables at Events** – Ask caterers to provide, then pick up, non-plastic utensils (i.e., washable silverware, bamboo utensils, wooden or ceramic chopsticks). You may also ask them to provide ceramic plates, glass cups, cloth napkins, and glass pitchers.

¹⁴ <https://www.forbes.com/sites/lauratenenbaum/2019/07/16/plastic-cutlery-is-terrible-for-the-environment-and-we-dont-need-to-have-it-delivered/?sh=33a5b6b54019>

¹⁵ https://www.sustainability.upenn.edu/sites/default/files/pdf/Staff%20%26%20Faculty%20Eco-Reps_Group%20Goals%20Resource%20Guides.pdf

¹⁶ https://www.sustainability.upenn.edu/sites/default/files/pdf/Staff%20%26%20Faculty%20Eco-Reps_Group%20Goals%20Resource%20Guides.pdf

- **Pledge to give up plastic utensils during a religious fast** – Make this a community commitment. For example, during Lent, some Christian congregations encourage their churchgoers to forgo commonly discarded single-use plastics.¹⁷

¹⁷ <https://www.washingtonpost.com/religion/2019/03/05/latest-lent-challenge-churches-give-up-plastic/>