**MONTGOMERY VILLAGE, MD.,** April 20, 2019 – Every day we get more alarming news about the proliferation and ubuquity of plastics in our environment. It appears that every single eco system in the planet contains plastics and is probably affected by them.

Plastics are miracle materials. They are durable, they are inert and do not affect food or medicine and are cheap to manufacture. They are also very tough and light in weight, so they are ideal as packing material. Durable plastics make our lives easier and manufactured goods affordable.

The most commonly used plastic is polyethilene. It accounts for about 34% of all plastics used. It is the material used for plastic bags and protective wrapping of all types of consumer goods. While there have been attempts to recycle this product, most of it ends up in sanitary landfills or even worse, our environment. In the US only 35% of plastics are recycled. It is difficult to assess how much of it ends up in landfills or is burned. It seems that wordwide, a significant portion ends up dumped on land or even worse in bodies of water.

Polyethilene can be degraded by bacteria. Several types have been identified that use this material as a souce of carbon. There are two factors that make this complex: one is that the bacteria needed for degradation is not always present and it may take some time for the process to take place; and two, byproducts of degradation are climate-change gases like methane and ethane.

As unsightly as plastics are in our environment, there is more to worry about on what happens as they enter and remain in different ecosystems and sometimes become almost invisible. Due to mechanical phenomena resulting from weather and other events, plastics are turned into ‘microplastics’. Because of their size, ubiquiteness and similarity with food, they end up being consumed by wild life, especially in the oceans. It is common to see in the news fish, amphibians and birds with their stomachs full of plastic, that has caused their deaths.

These cases are not foreshadows of what can happen. They are in fact examples of what our food chain could become. It is not difficult to predict that if something is not done, our main source of food, the oceans, may be compromised. We seem to be on the way to trade our means of substenance for the convenience of easy plastics.

The solution is simple, but by no means painless. We have to prohibit single-use (SU) plastics. We have to sacrifice convenience to protect our future food sources.

There are efforts throughout the US to ban SU plastics, but it is being done in a piece-meal approach. This approach may be on a county by county way or it may be the banning of some SU plastics and not others. As usual, progressive states on both coasts are taking the lead. California, Hawaii, New York and Washington, DC have banned plastic bags. Cities and counties in other states have banned or established fees for the use of plastic bags. It is not clear whether the latter has had any effect in reducing use.

The European Union has voted to ban some SU plastics gradually but not after 2025. Their [effort](https://www.dw.com/en/eu-reaches-agreement-on-single-use-plastic-ban/a-46797494) is geared to ban the top 10 SU plastic products that account for 50% in that part of the world.

Should we wait for world-wide famine and resulting social tsunamis before we act?

*Mario Salazar, the 21st Century Pacifist, is a radical plastic recycler and hopes to be living in a world devoid of SU plastics. He is in Twitter (@chibcharus), Google+, LinkedIn and Facebook (Mario Salazar).*