

When the ‘last straw’ is what we need!

We’re talking about the last plastic straw, of course.

Most plastic straws are made from polypropylene (#5 plastic). It is identifiable by the resin identification Code 5, which is actually recyclable, although, it seems, not in the form of drinking straws. It is the form of drinking straws that is the drawback. As small items like bottle tops and drinking straws proceed along conveyor belts in the recycling process, they tend to fall through the cracks and end up as landfill.

Polypropylene is “a highly recyclable plastic resin”, a byproduct of petroleum, a fossil fuel that requires a huge amount of energy to refine. The absence at present of programmes to recycle plastic straws is mainly owing to the costs involved.

Plastic takes a formidable time to decompose. Plastic straws are estimated to take up to 200 years to decompose, with plastic lids probably taking 450-1000 years; while glass bottles top the list with an estimated decomposition period of up to one million years.

Sea creatures often fall victim to plastic dumped in the sea. Many of us have seen the video of a marine turtle with a straw penetrating far up into a nostril. The eight-minute video went viral and has been seen on UTube by over nine million viewers. Many sea creatures are slowly strangled to death or else have their innards painfully wound round with plastic.

It would obviously be helpful if people picked up plastic straws on beaches, but even more helpful if we did not use them at all and went back to paper straws. These go back to the 1880s when a man named Marvin Stone glued strips of paper together and wound them into a ‘straw’ instead of sipping drinks through a hollow stalk of rye grass, which was commonly used until then. Paper straws remained popular until the 1960s when plastic straws took over. It is estimated that about 500 million plastic straws are used and discarded in America every day.

It seems that we are exposed to tiny specks of plastic in our tap and bottled water, and it is not yet known what effects this intake of chemicals has on the body. This also raises a question about the presence of plastic in fish. Refer to Health-E News on the Internet for details of research.

Mamba rescued in Mayville

The *Berea Mail* reported a mamba incident in Mayville early in April. A householder heard his two dogs barking in his courtyard and found them attacking a snake that had backed up against a wall. His pitbull cross was biting at the snake’s tail. The reptile then managed to slither away and slid under a concrete braai. It did not reappear.

The following morning, the householder found that his pitbull had died during the night. He had not realised that it had been bitten. He called Nick Evans of KZN Amphibian and Reptile Conservation and asked if he would come around if the snake was seen again.

Within minutes, his other dog began barking at the corner of the house. The householder, not expecting to see the snake again, found it hiding behind a concrete drain and the gutter pipe, which was sheltered by the braai stand.

Nick Evans arrived and, with the second dog safely locked away, he went looking for the snake. He said that snakes often die after a dog bite because the spine is frequently broken.

He removed the snake and found that its tail was moving, which meant that its spine was not broken, but it had some severe puncture wounds and was still bleeding quite freely.

Nick took the injured mamba to Carol Schloms of uShaka's Dangerous Creatures exhibit. Carl cleaned and medicated the wounds and put the snake in a clean dry container which was kept in a dark place for a few days while the snake recovered until it was well enough to be released in a natural area well away from people or buildings.

Do not try to kill snakes as a reaction to fear of them. Many of us have snakes in our gardens without ever knowing that they are there. If anyone is fearful when finding a snake, Nick will safely re-locate it. Contact him on 072 809 5806. For snake educational work and queries, e-mail nickevanskzn@gmail.com.

Unconditional love

Pets are great for our mental and physical health. Caring for an animal gives us a greater sense of purpose and meaningfulness.

“For the most part, pets just want to love and be loved. Studies have shown that just ten minutes of interacting with dogs can raise oxytocin levels, the body hormone that makes us feel more calm and connected. And less lonely.” (Alison Stone)

We release oxytocin through direct contact with others, so if you are isolated or depressed, having a pet can help to dissipate such feelings.

Most retirement establishments do not allow people to have pets. It would be really good to see such establishments taking on a couple of dogs themselves. This would make an inestimable difference to many residents. Labradors are among the many suitable breeds. There will always be residents who are not suffering any disablement who will be willing to walk dogs.

Dogs just have that special something that raises the spirits. They offer bountiful love and respond joyously to being loved back. Their tails wag at the slightest attention or even at one's presence. They have highly developed consciousness and are intuitive, sociable and responsive. Many people are cat-lovers, and cats are usually easy pets. People are happier and far less likely to feel lonely when there are animals around. When a retirement establishment adopts a couple of pets, it sends such a warm message.

EU victory for bee protectors and for the environment

It took seven years of dedicated action, but Avaaz and its millions of supporters across the world have succeeded in getting pesticides banned from agricultural use in the EU.

Well over five million people from all over the world signed the Avaaz petition, and more than \$2.5 million was donated to Avaaz's bee campaigning and research.

Many farmers were anti-ban, so Avaaz stepped up efforts to bring together organic and conventional pro-ban farmers and also worked closely with the European Commission. The campaign began way back in 2011 in France when one million Avaazers tried to persuade France to lead by declaring a ban. They were supported by the French Minister of the Environment, Nicolas Hulot, who has been at the forefront of the efforts to ban neonics across the EU. Neonics refers to neonicotinoids, a type of insecticide that has been used for about twenty years, especially against sap-feeding insects. Pollinators like bees are estimated to pollinate about 70 of the top 100 crops that feed 90% of the world.

Germany followed France in banning pesticides that killed bees, and last year the UK joined them. One by one, several smaller EU countries followed, including the Netherlands and Greece.

The shift is from pesticides to a new model of agroecology food production which is in harmony with nature. Agroecology is the study of ecological processes involved in agriculture.

The message is clear: if we want things to change for the better, we have to care enough to speak up. This is a message we all need to take to heart. Never look the other way when speaking up could help make a difference. Parents and teachers have a seminal role to play here.