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Living the life less plastic

What has grown from 40 people in Perth to 25,000 people in 83 countries?

What inspired 33,000 views and 463 shares on [Facebook](#) in just two days?

What do coffee shops in Cottesloe, Claremont, Mosman Park, Peppermint Grove, Subiaco and Victoria Park have in common? It's Plastic Free July!

The Plastic Free July environmental initiative which began in Perth's western suburbs with 40 volunteers four years ago has grown into a global campaign involving more than 25,000 people, schools and businesses in 83 countries - and the challenge is again on offer to Perth residents this week.

Stemming from an initiative by the Western Metropolitan Regional Council's Earth Carers waste education program, Plastic Free July challenges people, schools, businesses and community groups to avoid single-use plastic for a month.

Co-founder of the campaign and Earth Carers Coordinator at WMRC, Rebecca Prince-Ruiz, says the success of Plastic Free July has taken its founders by surprise.

"Although it's a simple concept, saying no to single-use plastic, such as shopping bags, drink bottles, disposable cups and straws can be challenging, it opens your eyes to how ubiquitous plastic is in our society and with it the many issues connected with it, not least the environmental consequences," she says.

"Unlike other materials like paper or glass, most plastic is downcycled, so it only gets recycled once, and recycle rates are as low as about 23%, so joining in the Plastic Free July challenge is a way of drawing attention to this major issue and doing something about it.

"Participants soon discover it's not a breeze", in fact it's extremely hard to avoid plastic packaging, but going on the Plastic Free July challenge has resulted in many people deciding to go plastic free permanently which is really life changing."

Plastic Free July was developed by the WMRC's Earth Carers Programme in 2011. By 2014, 14,000 people in 69 countries had signed up to the challenge and this year 290 businesses have already registered.

According to the first rigorous global estimate published in Science Today, around 8 million metric tonnes of plastic go into the oceans each year, equivalent to 16 shopping bags full of plastic for every metre of coastline (excluding Antarctica). By 2025, there will be enough plastic in the ocean - on our most conservative estimates - to cover five per cent of the earth's entire surface in cling film each year.

"No one person has the answers to single-use plastic," adds Ms Prince-Ruiz. "But by creating Plastic Free July and providing a means for people to challenge our habit of accepting single-use plastic, we're enabling a way of life that more and more people want to live - shopping locally and more ethically, being more healthy, gaining greater engagement with the local community and living more lightly on the planet."

To register for the Plastic July Challenge, or for further information, go to www.plasticfreejuly.org

Ends

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BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Plastic is a very recent phenomenon, really only becoming part of people's lives since the 1950s. But the impact on plastic in our lives today is undeniable – it's everywhere. There was more plastic produced in the first 10 years of this century than all of last century.

Here are some examples of what individuals and organisations are doing:

- Lindsay Miles, Perth blogger of [Treading My Own Path](#), who was inspired to write a book after doing Plastic Free July for several years - the e-guide *That's a Wrap: Practical Tips, Tricks and Inspiration for Going Plastic Free*: "Plastic Free July changed everything for me. It challenged many things that I'd just accepted to be true, and behaviours I'd simply accepted as the way that things were done. It changed the way I saw the world. It changed the way I saw the problems in the world. It made me realise that change began with me. It made me act. I slowly cut plastic out of my life, and in doing so I discovered a thriving local community, made many new connections with like-minded people, improved my health, began supporting local businesses and really started living a life that was in line with my values – and felt much happier for it, too!"
- 37 coffee shops in Perth from Claremont, Cottesloe, Mosman Park, Peppermint Grove, Subiaco, Victoria Park as well as Gisborne (NZ) are taking part in the Plastic Free July campaign '[Bring One Get One Tree](#)', where a tree is planted locally every time someone buys a takeaway coffee in a *reusable* cup. The campaign started in 2014 and so far 5000 coffees in reusable cups have been purchased. That's a lots of trees – and a lot of landfill waste prevented!
- Amanda Gouge, [Wasteless Pantry](#), Mundaring (Perth hills): Amanda opened the Wasteless Pantry in the Perth hills in June this year because of her frustration of doing Plastic Free July for the past few years and finding it difficult to procure bulk goods items in Perth's eastern suburbs.
- Double Bay (Sydney) restaurant '[Little Jean](#)' sells no bottled drinks, buys its milk in reusable 'bladders', offers discounts for customers with reusable takeaway coffee cups and has pledged to go 'plastic free' this July.
- [Transition Towns Victoria Park \(Western Australia\)](#): Series of workshops and community events for Plastic Free July, along with the 'Bring One, Get One Tree' campaign involving local cafes to encourage people to bring reusable cups.
- Farmers Markets: Margaret River, Bondi, Berkeley Springs (California), Northey St City Farm (Brisbane) are just a few.
- Manly Council is holding a series of events throughout July which are being launched by the Premier of NSW and the Mayor of Manly. A Manly residents group is also starting a no straws campaign to encourage local cafes to stop offering straws, as is [Plastic Free Sydney](#).
- [Raglan, NZ](#): The entire town pledged to go plastic free in July 2014. This included shops no longer using plastic bags, the local pub encouraging people not to use plastic straws, and a 'Plastics Anonymous' meeting night each Friday at the local pub (where people shared their 'dilemmas' and ideas for alternatives, plus a good socialise!)
- [Plastic Free Cambodia](#): education programs in schools to discourage single-use plastic; also 'last straw' campaign to discourage the use of plastic straws. An article from [Phnom Penh Post](#) also details more about business initiatives.

So why have so many people from all parts of the globe become part of Plastic Free July?

Co-founder Rebecca Prince-Ruiz believes it's a mixture of reasons. "Many people want to do more to improve the world, but can feel hugely overwhelmed – and there's no doubt that the issues around plastic production and pollution can become cause for despair. But by giving people some simple tools and resources to take charge of their own actions on a daily basis including decisions at home and when out, people feel empowered – and in doing something about it, are becoming more and more emboldened to do more in their lives and communities".

Rebecca also believes that enabling people to share their stories – both their successes and their challenges – has been a key to the success of Plastic Free July. “Our Facebook page in particular has organically become a forum where people take photos, share their achievements and discoveries of how to live with less plastic, which inspires others. Then we’ll also have people post their problems – and it’ll be members of the Plastic Free July community who’ll offer solutions. So people aren’t feeling alone or isolated in trying to make the world a better place – instead they feel connected and learn from each other, and we do our best to affirm everyone’s achievements”.

Many people have also been surprised at how avoiding single-use packaging has meant they are eating far more healthily. “It makes sense because most junk food, packaged food and food containing preservatives and ingredients like palm oil comes in plastic packaging,” says Rebecca. “Avoiding packaging often means you’re buying whole foods, and cooking more. We also hear of many people feeling more connected in their local community as the challenge necessitates food shopping at local stores and farmers markets”.

Going on the Plastic Free July challenge has also resulted in many people deciding to go plastic free permanently. Which is exactly Rebecca’s hope. “So many people write and say that after doing the challenge they just can’t go back to their old habits of accepting goods in plastic packaging”, Rebecca said. Many people have chosen to blog about their experiences of doing this, which in turn inspires others.

Some examples of plastic-free blogs:

- [A Year Without Plastic](#)
- [The Rogue Ginger](#)
- [A Lazy Girl Goes Green](#)
- [My Plastic-Free Life](#): Beth Terry has updated her book *Plastic-Free: How I Kicked the Plastic Habit and You Can Too* with a section on Plastic Free July.

The wider context

Plastic Free July has also made close links to a number of other organisations committed to reducing plastic in the environment. “Responsible Runners (Sydney), Take 3, Responsible Cafes, and the Two Hands Project are just a few of the groups we collaborate with,” said Rebecca. In 2013 Rebecca was also part of the [“International Plastic-Free Help Desk”](#) with other plastic activists from around the world. A number of towns and councils are now taking up plastic bag bans, and some are also banning the sale of disposable water bottles. “We are all part of the same cause, which is to raise awareness about the issues around single-use plastic and to reduce our use of it”.

Plastic Free July was also instrumental in helping to promote the [petition for supermarkets to end single-use packaging of fruit and vegetables](#) started by fellow West Australian, Broome resident Pat Lowe. The petition was signed by 50,000 people in just three weeks in 2014. “People are clearly frustrated at the waste and the unnecessary consumption that plastic packaging represents in our lives and want a way out,” Rebecca said.

Keeping up with science

In 2012 Rebecca received a TeachWild Fellowship with CSIRO researching marine debris in Queensland, which was part of the broader 3-year [CSIRO study](#) (see [Catalyst](#)) into marine debris around Australia. Then in October 2014, she helped to investigate and document the ‘plastic soup’ of the North Atlantic Ocean as a member of a multidisciplinary team aboard [Pangaea Explorations’](#) Sea Dragon ship. Rebecca has just been awarded a 2015 Churchill Fellowship to travel overseas and further investigate the issue of plastic pollution.

In summer this year the City of Fremantle in collaboration with Plastic Free July organised a plastic-free festival in which Australian marine scientist [Dr Jennifer Lavers](#) was the guest of honour. Dr Lavers spoke to packed audiences about her work with the flat-footed Shearwater birds, found all around the southern coastline of Australia. Shearwater mothers skim the ocean’s surface to find sealife to feed their babies. Dr Lavers’ team is now finding that over 90% of the dead Shearwater chicks found in their survey have ingested plastics in their stomachs. The problem with the plastic ingestion is that the birds cannot digest it, and it fills them up, so that the chicks ultimately starve to death.

“We try to be as informed as possible about current scientific research of what’s going on, particularly in an Australian context. Also, we find that once people start on the Plastic Free July journey they want to know more – more about what’s happening in the environment, more on health impacts, and more generally on alternatives to single-use packaging”, said Rebecca.

So what are some of the issues around plastic?

“Plastic is an amazing material without question,” said Rebecca, “but the issue is that so many products which are only meant to last a few minutes – like food packaging and toiletry products – are packaged in plastic which will last for between 50 to 1000 years! And plastic doesn’t break down – it breaks up. Aside from the small amount incinerated, most is in landfill or becomes litter. It becomes smaller and smaller ... and tragically, ever easier for our marine and wild life to ingest. We need to be rethinking the design of everyday products so that they don’t last forever”.

A few staggering statistics:

- We now use a million plastic bags a minute globally.
- Some sources estimate that 500 million plastic straws are used daily. (McDonalds alone have over [69 million customers daily!](#))
- Every day an estimated 2.25 billion takeaway coffee cups are consumed.
- Plastic now makes up 75-90% of marine pollution.
- In Australia the CSIRO’s recent three-year marine survey found that the density of plastic ranges from a few thousand pieces of plastic per square kilometre to more than 40,000 pieces of plastic per square kilometre.
- Plastic can act as a sponge for other toxins in the ocean to cling to, is then ingested by sea creatures and toxins then biomagnify up the food chain.
- In some patches of the ocean the plastic to plankton ratio is up to 46:1.
- We currently recover only 5-10% of the plastics we produce - the rest is landfilled or litter.

We would also recommend the following people from our network for interview:

- Lindsay Miles, [Treading My Own Path](#) Perth blogger and author of e-guide *That’s a Wrap*
- Amanda Gouge, proprietor of [The Wasteless Pantry](#) in Mundaring
- Erin Rhoads, [The Rogue Ginger](#) blogger and author
- [Dr Denise Hardesty](#), Senior Research Scientist CSIRO and Team Leader of the CSIRO Marine Debris Survey
- [Tim Silverwood](#), founder of Take 3
- [Alexx Stuart](#), real food and low tox living expert

Some External Sources:

- **Marine life and plastic:** [Catalyst clip ‘Plastic Oceans’](#); [CSIRO Marine Debris Survey](#); <http://www.csiro.au/en/News/News-releases/2014/Plastic-on-the-coasts-is-ours>; [Dr Jennifer Lavers](#); [In the Ocean the Most Harmful Plastic is too Small to See](#) (Conversation)
- **Use of plastic:** [Plastic bags in Australia](#); [Plastic bags in the world](#); [Australian Marine Conservancy](#);
- **Bottled water:** [Increase in bottled water in Australia](#); [Choice magazine: bottle vs tap](#);
- **Microbeads in cosmetics:** [Beat the Microbeads](#);
- **Plastic litter in Australia:** [Keep Australia Beautiful National Litter Index](#)
- **Endocrine disruption and plastic:** Choice magazine; <http://www.scientificamerican.com/article/united-nations-panel-calls-hormone-disruptors-global-threat/>; <http://www.who.int/ceh/publications/endocrine/en/>
- **Introduction to issues around plastic:** [BagIt movie](#)