

Environmental tip of the month

Soft plastic is plastic that is stretchy, crinkly, it is often coloured &/or 'metalized'. It is used to wrap fruit and veg, biscuits, crisps and so many of the things we buy. The Co-op estimate that 25% of their own-brand packaging is soft plastic. Research has shown that we tend to buy more and pay more for stuff wrapped in plastic. But how do we dispose of it without adding to the mountain of plastic waste choking our rivers and oceans and washing up on our beaches?

The scale of the problem is vast: global plastic production is 500,000,000 tons a year. Half of the world's plastic has been made in the last 15 years and is set for exponential growth over the coming decade. Soft plastic isn't wanted in South Hams recycling bins but don't worry, those nice environmentally concerned people at Tesco – our biggest food retailer – have come up with the solution. Just bring your soft plastic packaging along to their stores, put it in the specially marked bins and – bingo! – problem solved.

Or so we were led to believe until Bloomberg and Greenpeace* decided to investigate. They put tracking devices into various items of soft plastic and put them in the magic bins in Tesco. To cut a long story short, the plastic travelled across Europe through a variety of brokers who are making their fortunes out of 'processing' this stuff and – after 2,000 miles – the plastic was either burned in a cement works in East Poland or landfilled in Turkey. The UK ships 575 tons of waste plastic to Turkey *every day*. Out of sight, out of mind.

So what about those 'bio plastics' that, until recently, wrapped magazines and stuff from environmentally concerned publishers and charities? Bio plastics are engineered from plant derived polymers to behave like petro-chemical plastics (plastic is a by product of oil). The problem is that they need sunshine and oxygen to break down, neither of which is available in landfill, the oceans or most composting facilities.

Companies are falling over themselves to boast about how eco-friendly, green, sustainable, natural, ethical they are. It's called greenwashing. Marketers are having a field day out of all this, all of a sudden the corporate world is concerned and caring and giving us solutions to salve our troubled collective consciences. The government offers lucrative Packaging Recovery Notes which are bought by the likes of Tesco and sold on to help make foreign waste brokers their fortunes. Carbon offsetting allows companies to continue to pump emissions into the atmosphere while enabling the government to claim it is meeting its 'green' targets. Occasionally it goes wrong like when VW were caught fiddling their emission claims, their diesel engines were pumping 40 times the legal limit of nitrogen oxide pollutants.

At last the government's Competition and Marketing Authority is going to take action to stop greenwashing with its Green Claims Code which will take action against companies making false 'eco' claims. So this month's tip is **be cynical**, don't take the marketing hype at face value. Don't believe the claims about sustainably sourced this, that and the other. It's a complicated picture across intricate supply chains. Unfortunately, like the plastic going to Turkey, we are all being taken for a ride.

*<https://www.bloomberg.com/graphics/2022-tesco-recycle-plastic-waste-pledge-falls-short/>

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