

KICK THE (SINGLE-USE) BOTTLE

Anglers, and fishing guide programs in particular, are taking the lead in the initiative away from a decades-old habit of using one-and-done plastics.

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Our boat steamed wide transects above a seafloor canyon 35 miles off the coast of Guatemala, waves rolling by in wide, gentle basins. On the hunt for sailfish, we motored past a gull perched on a dead sea turtle, buoyant with rot and bleached the color of sand. Beside the pair, a Styrofoam cup bobbed in the gin-clear water.

It was the last day of the No Sancocho Sailfish Shootout, an offshore tournament put on by Casa Vieja Lodge. By noon our boat had released four sailfish and raised two more to a trailing echelon of teaser lines and baited lines — a slow day for the fishery. In 2016, one of the lodge's boats released 178 sailfish over three days.

"You know why that turtle is dead?" asked Matt McLeod of Yellowfin Yachts, who was fishing in the tournament. "Because its stomach is full of plastic. It's as bad as I've ever seen it — not here, everywhere. Costa Rica just had a huge turtle die-off."

Leatherback turtles often mistake grocery bags for jellyfish. A 2015 report estimates that more than half of the world's sea turtles may have ingested plastic. Since a turtle can't break down the stuff any better than the rest of the environment, material blockage of the animal's digestive system will eventually kill it.

They're not alone. Blue whales swallow slurries of krill and plastic, and diving birds get entangled in old fishing nets. Entire ecosystems, from phytoplankton to the largest animal on Earth, suffer the ill effects of plastic, and the Pacific coast of Guatemala is no exception.

During the tournament we passed several dead turtles riding high in the water, along with a variety of plastic flotsam. We didn't need a biologist on board to understand that petrochemical refuse had infiltrated the marine ecosystem. What we needed an expert to explain was that the majority of the ocean's plastic isn't visible.

"If you were sailing through some of these places, just looking at the surface, you wouldn't know there was a problem," said Lia Colabello, who's been fighting ocean trash for the past six years. "But if you were to scoop up some water or look under the surface, you'd see lots of small fragments that are almost impossible to retrieve."

Plastic doesn't biodegrade. Most of it just breaks down into pieces smaller than a grain of rice, and those fragments hang suspended in the water column for inquisitive passersby to eat.

Three years ago, Colabello started working with polarized sunglasses maker Costa Del Mar to help the company reduce its plastic consumption and to inspire other water-bound communities to do likewise. Spearheading the initiative is Peter Vandergrift, Costa's fly fishing community leader. Together, they launched a campaign called Kick Plastic and set up a program to help fishing guides ditch plastic bottles. The program currently saves freshwater and saltwater fisheries from tens of thousands of water bottles each year.

"My personal goal is that in 10 years, we rid every guide boat of plastic water bottles," Peter said. "And the movement is snowballing. Every day I have guides calling me wanting to get on board."





Anglers taking the lead on habitat stewardship is a natural progression. Few other groups so regularly or thoroughly interact with marine and riverine ecosystems. Guatemala's Casa Vieja Lodge is a wholehearted adopter of the program, as is WorldCast Anglers in Idaho.

Near the top of the terrestrial water cycle, WorldCast Anglers' 40-plus guides run more than 3,000 trips per season on the trout streams that drain the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem. Nowhere in its service — not on the drift boats, not in the fly shop, not in the guides' pickup trucks — will you find a slab of single-use water bottles.

"We've eliminated using about 40,000 bottles per season," said Mike Dawes, founder of WorldCast. "To be honest, it was a hell of a lot easier than we expected."

WorldCast joined the Kick Plastic campaign in 2016 and started handing out refillable stainless bottles to clients. The WorldCast fly shop then swapped plastic fly cups for paper cartons. In the same way that barbless hooks and rubberized nets have become standard for Western trout fishing, so too can avoiding single-use plastic, Mike said.

"It ain't gonna stop if we don't start," he said. "The next thing we need to deal with is the lunch program — all those plastic sandwich bags."

When Mike drew a hard line to stop using plastic water bottles, every one of his guides joined the movement. The momentum trickled down from the guides to the clients, and soon Mike saw a self-propagating energy to the initiative. Peter and Lia have seen the same the world over: Among anglers, it's cool to kick plastic.

But coming back from six decades of single-use consumer behavior will take time.

"We need to take a deeper look at the current system of relying on plastic and question it from both a consumer and corporate perspective."

- LIA COLABELLO — MARINE CONSERVATIONIST

OPPOSITE (TOP): Watching the spread during the sailfish tournament in Guatemala. **BOTTOM:** A small example of what's found on a typical day on the water. **THIS PAGE:** Our throwaway culture has a lasting impact on ocean ecosystems.



PHOTOGRAPHER: 5Gyres

"We can trace the exact moment when our culture shifted from thrifty to throwaway," Lia said. "During World War II, kids saved aluminum foil from bubble gum to give back to the war effort. Ten years later, in 1955, Life magazine published a photo of a family throwing single-use dishes in the air, writing that washing them was unnecessary because they were all meant to be thrown away."

That sounded pretty good until 1997, when Charles Moore discovered what's known as the great Pacific garbage patch between Hawaii and California. It took him a week to cross it. Conservation groups have been working on the issue ever since, but one oft-quoted estimate says that by 2050 our oceans will contain more plastic than fish.

In the face of this powerful plastic flow tide, Lia sees encouraging signs. WorldCast is one of many organizations in the Rocky Mountains ditching plastic. Casa Vieja not only imports bamboo straws from Costa Rica and hands out stainless steel bottles to its anglers, it also purifies tap water with ozone and ultraviolet filters to discourage single-use bottles.

She talks with an effusive, hell-yeah-we-can-do-this attitude.

"This is totally solvable," she said. "We need to take a deeper look at the current system of relying on plastic and question it from both a consumer and corporate perspective. But if we challenge ourselves, we can move the needle."

