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| Speak Up Kōrerotia  Plastic Waste  15 July 2020 | |
| Male | This programme was first broadcast on Canterbury’s community access radio station Plains FM, 96.9 and was made with the assistance of New Zealand on Air. |
| Female | Coming up next conversations on human rights with “Speak Up” – “Kōrerotia”, here on Plains FM. |
| Sally | E ngā mana,  E ngā reo,  E ngā hau e whā  Tēnā koutou katoa  Nau mai ki tēnei hōtaka: “Speak Up” – “Kōrerotia”.    Tune in as our guests “Speak Up”, sharing their unique and powerful experiences and opinions and may you also be inspired to “Speak Up” when the moment is right.  Tēnā koe. Welcome to Speak Up – Kōrerotia and today we’re going to be talking about plastic waste and how that links into human rights as well. We’ve got Anthea Madill, Helen Townsend and Ross Trotter with us and I might pass it over to you each to introduce yourselves, tell us a wee bit about why you’re involved in the podcast today, what’s your interest in this topic. Perhaps Ross, we’ll start with you. |
| Ross | Sure. I’m the Resource Recovery Manager for Christchurch City Council, also the representative for the Canterbury region for WasteMINZ for the territorial authority and has also worked with the Ministry for Environment with their National Resource Recovery Taskforce and also with the design of their container return scheme. My interest is that as a council, we see a lot of the material that gets manufactured and has to find a use or a home somewhere and sometimes that can be recycled and sometimes that can be landfill. So really looking at ways which we can reduce the amount of plastics and effectively have products that can be recycled. |
| Sally | And I think we’re going to talk a bit about the recycling - or lack thereof, post-lockdown - which is quite horrifying. |
| Ross | Hmm. |
| Helen | Kia ora, ko Helen Townsend ahau. Nō The Rubbish Whisperer ahau, nō Aotearoa Plastic Pollution Alliance ahau. I am Helen and I am the founder of the Rubbish Whisperer and I am the co-chair of the Aotearoa Plastic Pollution Alliance and the reason that I am here talking about plastic pollution and human rights is that recently APPA (The Aotearoa Plastic Pollution Alliance) released a statement in support of Black Lives Matter and lots of people wondered why an anti-plastic group was weighing in on racism and the reason is that plastic pollution is a result of our disposable culture and if we choose to have a whole lot of single use products, then we have to put the rubbish and those products when we’re finished with them somewhere. And actually, someone else has said it better than I am going to say it so if you don’t mind I’ll just say a quote here. So Hop Hopkins, who is part of the Sierra Club in the US, said - he was talking about climate change but it applies to plastic pollution as well - that “You can’t have climate change without sacrifice zones and you can’t have sacrifice zones without disposable people. And you can’t have disposable people without racism. We’re in this global environmental mess because we have declared parts of our planet to be disposable and when we pollute the hell out of a place, that’s a way of saying that that place and the people and all of the other life that live there are of no value.” |
| Sally | That’s very tragic and very deep. |
| Helen | Yeah sorry, started deep straight away but I think that’s why we’re here. |
| Sally | Helen, would you mind telling us a wee bit please about the Rubbish Whisperer? What is it? |
| Helen | Ah so the Rubbish Whisperer is a company that I set up to provide reusable alternatives to single use products. |
| Sally | Perfect. And our final guest then, Anthea. |
| Anthea | Kia ora, I’m Anthea Madill and I run a business called Clever Green and the main project of that is Remix Plastic and the aim of the project is to educate on sustainability and help empower people to make sustainable changes. I started out working for the Rubbish Whisperer with Helen and learnt that there… while there’s a lot of products that people can swap to, people didn’t really understand what else they could be doing. So I set up the business to educate in that space and I do that through various different things like workshops, presentations and podcasts. |
| Sally | Yes so both Helen and Anthea are part of the ‘So Circular’ podcast also on Plains FM. So it’s really cool, actually, to be interviewing other hosts of other shows on this station!  So I guess it’d be great to think about our topic which is plastic pollution, plastic waste. I guess this idea between consumption and distribution and then disposableness as well. I originally thought about this topic from single-use plastic but I think there’s obviously a lot of other elements to it as well. But if we’re talking about single-use plastics, just that one component - what kind of things do we mean? What is ‘single use’? |
| Anthea | Do you want to take this one? |
| Helen | So single-use plastic is plastic that is designed only to be used once. So things like packaging around your chips or your biscuits or something like that. So single-use plastic is… has generally low value when it comes to recycling, often it’s made up of different layers of materials and it causes a lot of the problems of plastic pollution. |
| Sally | Can hard plastic be single-use plastic as well? |
| Anthea | Yes, I don’t know if you want to…. |
| Ross | Yeah look it can be, it’s more, I suppose, what it’s designed for and the purpose and if it can be re-used or recycled but yes, some hard plastics can be single use as well. |
| Sally | OK so this brings us to this particular topic in this particular moment in time. It’s July 2020, that means it’s exactly a year since the government banned the use of single use plastic bags. The statistics sound pretty amazing: 1.1 billion plastic bags have been taken out of circulation in a single year which sounds fantastic and you also think goodness, just how many does that mean we’ve put into landfill before the ban went into place? It’s also Plastic-Free July - which we’ll talk about a bit later - but it’s also just a couple of months since we came out of lockdown and it seems like for some reason, recycling in Christchurch has really fallen by the wayside. I’d be keen to hear some statistics from you, Ross, but also any idea as to why. |
| Ross | Yeah sure. First of all, it’s probably more of a national problem since the Covid19 and the lockdown. During that period, we saw a lot of pressure on the kerbside collection service, so we had extra people working from home, not being able to dispose of their material at work so it all came through the kerbside system. What we found is people were using what - in our case the wheelie bins - what capacity there was. So once the rubbish bin was full up, they started using the recycling bin or in some cases their organics bin or funnily enough, we’ve had organics in the recycling as well. So it was really a capacity issue.  Now what some of the…. At the height of it, we were probably seeing around 50% to 60% of our recycling being contaminated with the wrong material. We have been able to, through a number of education campaigns as well as having an audit team physically going and checking bins, assessing what’s in the bins and either not collecting or providing education material or for those who are doing it spot on getting a gold star.  So we have seen with that education, that percentage come down to around 15% contamination. Ideally for the processing of that material through our materials recovery facility (or MRF), it needs to be around about 10% to get good quality product through the process and product that can be sold either locally or internationally.  So still got some challenge ahead to pull that number back. We are aware that there are still some councils in New Zealand that all their recycling is going to landfill, so they haven’t been able to separate out that contamination to a point where it’s viable to recycle. And other councils are doing really well and back to normal. |
| Anthea | Can I just ask a quick question? |
| Ross | Sure. |
| Anthea | Just to clarify, during lockdown the Christchurch City Council wasn’t recycling what was put out in the recycling bins - is that correct? |
| Ross | Yes, for a period we weren’t able to operate the facility and that was mainly due to the proximity and safe distancing of people working on the sort line. So yeah, there was a period… We started back again on the 5th of May processing. |
| Anthea | OK so it was only a short time. |
| Ross | Yes, it was a matter of a few weeks and what we were doing from then was assessing the trucks before we were processing them to make sure they were viable to actually process, so once the plant was up and running again. |
| Anthea | Cool, thanks. |
| Sally | Ross, do you have some statistics around how much? |
| Ross | Yeah I do. We… Since the plant opened again in early May, we’ve had to send 696 truckloads of recycling direct to landfill and that equates to 3,480 tonnes and that’s about 46% of material that we should have been able to recycle. Yeah, so it’s quite significant. |
| Anthea | That’s huge. |
| Ross | There is an associated cost with that, each truck is, ballpark figure, costs around $1,000 for us to send that to landfill as opposed to processing that material and recycling it. And you know, what we’ve been putting out in our communications and we’ve been quite active in putting this information out to the public, is that it is a cost to the ratepayer. I mean Council can facilitate the collection and the processing and the education, but if the wrong things are going in the recycling bin we can’t actually process it. So that cost falls back on the ratepayer so we really wanted to push that message that to save yourself some money, as well as do the right thing for the environment, that this behaviour needs to change. |
| Sally | One thing that I also noticed that there was an article in the newspaper a few weeks ago, you’ve just given us more up to date figures but even then, that was 30x more than the entire amount sent to landfill in 2018/2019 and that was just in a few week period. So not only is it a lot but it’s also so much more than it has been previously. |
| Ross | And I suppose that’s the frustrating thing for us, is that yeah you’re right, in previous year we only sent a total of 23 trucks to landfill. So we know that we can do a lot better and we know we have done a lot better, it’s just getting back to that pre-Covid situation and getting that behaviour back to where it was. Like I say, we’re making great improvement but we’ve still got a little bit to go to get back to where we need to be. |
| Sally | How about plastic consumption more broadly? If we’re thinking about just how much plastic we consume in Christchurch or in New Zealand, have we got any statistics around that? |
| Anthea | I don’t know if there are any statistics. |
| Ross | What I can tell you from Christchurch City Council in terms of the kerbside collection and what we get through the recycling. So total recycling is around about 35,000 tonnes per annum and of that there’s about 2,800 tonnes is plastic. So we separate that out, or our contractor will separate that out, into three grades, so you have your PET or your number 1s and your HDPE, number 2 and the rest is a mixed plastic grade. The mixed plastics is around 2,300 tonnes per annum and that’s probably been reasonably static for the last two to three years, that number. We have recently advised that we will no longer be taking not only soft plastics but also plastics numbers three, four, six and seven. So they are no longer accepted as recyclables so that material will now be going to landfill and as we can’t have that, that will be a contaminant to our recycling collection going forward. |
| Helen | If we look at numbers of single-use plastics produced, I don’t have Christchurch numbers but for example New Zealanders use 808,000 disposable coffee cups every day. |
| Anthea | It’s huge, aye. |
| Helen | And the world globally, we use a million single use plastic water bottles every minute. |
| Sally | Goodness it’s horrifying. |
| Anthea | It’s massive, aye. |
| Helen | Yeah the amounts of single use plastics that we use in our day-to-day life in New Zealand and globally is massive. |
| Sally | And I guess this is a question about which you’ll be pretty passionate - but why does it matter? Why are we talking about reducing plastic usage? |
| Anthea | Oh big question! |
| Helen | There’s so many different aspects to this. |
| Anthea | Yeah there’s different angles. |
| Helen | Who wants to go first? |
| Anthea | I could start with this. So I think that for a lot of people single-use plastic is a tangible way to start being sustainable and so it’s a good way to start thinking about waste in general and this is the way that I approach it anyway is that plastic is just one part of it but it’s the easy visible thing that you can do, that you can feel like you can actually make a tangible change with and I think that that’s a good way to start if that answers the question. It doesn’t really, does it?! |
| Helen | From a human rights perspective, the plastic we produce and the plastic we recycle has to end up somewhere. So 80% of the plastic that ends up in the sea comes from five countries in Asia and we can say…point the finger and say look at all the plastics that’s coming from your countries but New Zealand exports plastic and paper for recycling to Indonesia. So even though we’re talking about plastic, I’m going to talk about paper for a minute because the paper that is sent to Indonesia for recycling is often contaminated with single-use plastics that can’t be recycled. So things like multi-layered packaging that’s not gone through the plastic recycling system, it’s ended up in the paper. And this paper, when it goes to the paper mill, they have to take the single-use plastic out of it but then there’s nowhere to put it. There’s nothing to do with it. So we are sending our rubbish there and then pointing the finger and saying you and the developing world are making all of this plastic that’s going into the ocean. |
| Sally | When you talk about this linkage between the places where plastic needs to be disposed of and the linkage between human rights, it makes me think a lot of climate change as well and the impacts of disaster affecting certain groups of people more than others and that’s usually because of where they are living which are more susceptible to the effects of climate change. |
| Helen | Yeah and we have - not we, us in this room but we as the developed world - have planned this. So in 1991, an economist who was working for the World Bank made the economic case for sending our toxic waste to the developing world by saying that the economic logic of dumping a load of toxic waste in the lowest wage country is impeccable. So in other words, when it comes to our plastic rubbish, economically those people who earn less are worth less than the people who earn more which is horrifying, it’s awful. |
| Anthea | So awful. |
| Ross | Look that’s why we would like to see a shift from onshore recycling. Christchurch has, with the contractor travelled overseas to see what does happen to the plastics, the paper that we do send over there and are confident with our material that yes it’s being done in an ethical and environmentally sustainable way. But there’s so much that isn’t and I think we need to take that responsibility and part of moving towards only collecting the plastics 1s, 2s and 5s is we know that they can all be processed and there’s demand for them here in New Zealand. The paper, the fibre, that is still problematic because there is a lot still going offshore. Since the Chinese national saw the percentage of contamination has reduced for acceptance so it’s down from 5% to 0.5% but still, there’s that fraction that’s still problematic. So we need to… And look, there’s a lot of work being done at not only central government level but also with councils on a regional basis to look at alternatives into what we can be doing here to make sure that it’s properly recycled or reprocessed or reused here in New Zealand. |
| Sally | Great well, that might be a good place to have our first break and Anthea, we’re going to listen to your husband’s song. Do you want to give us a little bit of an introduction to it? |
| Anthea | Sure. So this is… My husband is a musician and wrote this song about generally climate change but yeah, you can take from it what you like. |
|  | **MUSIC – LYNCH MOB BY DANIEL MADILL** |
| Sally | You’re listening to Speak Up – Kōrerotia, here on Plains FM, 96.9. We’re speaking with Anthea Madill, Helen Townsend and Ross Trotter about plastic consumption and plastic waste. It’s July 2020 and this is a great time to introduce the concept of Plastic-Free July, which perhaps some of you listening to this are actually in fact doing.  Firstly, what was the rationale behind this concept and a little bit of an introduction to the idea of Plastic-Free July would be great. |
| Anthea | Cool. So Plastic-Free July was started in Australia in 2011 and it was by a group of people who wanted to make reducing single-use plastic accessible to people and like link up people who were trying to reduce their impact and connect them with resources and things like that. And within that time - so that’s, what, nine years? - there’s been a massive shift in people’s awareness about it but I imagine it would have been a struggle for them starting it. You’ll know from starting trying to reduce plastic seven years ago, Helen, I guess? |
| Helen | Yeah so I started the Rubbish Whisperer seven years ago and at that time I had to explain what reusable produce bags were and why people might want to use a reusable bag instead of a single-use plastic bag and the difference between then and now is amazing. Also Plastic-Free July wasn’t even on the radar anywhere really in 2013 and now it’s something that individuals are picking up and companies are picking up on as well. |
| Anthea | Yes so it’s like a global campaign that is… The idea is that it’s a Plastic-Free July challenge where people are single-use plastic free for a month but that’s almost impossible. So it is very much a challenge and really hard but I think that it’s a good way for people to start thinking about this and kind of take the month as their starting point so they can start reducing things through July and then carry that on afterwards. I think the crucial thing is that you don’t just go back to how you were after July, that you kind of keep some of those habits. |
| Sally | I’ve got some statistics here from the Plastic Free Foundation. They thought throughout July 2019 an estimated 250 million people participated in Plastic-Free July and that was pretty much worldwide, they had 177 countries where people registered their participation. So you’re right, it is really a global movement which is great. And also some statistics around the impact as well: the Plastic Free Foundation, in their research, thought that people who participated reduced their household waste by 23 kilos per year per person which is perhaps 5% of household waste. And then the total savings of all those 250 million people participating: 825 million kilos of plastic per year. |
| Anthea | That’s amazing, aye. |
| Helen | That’s a sizeable amount and sometimes it feels that what difference can I make as an individual but as one individual, yes. But as… What did we say? 250 million. We’re no longer individuals, we’re now a movement of people. |
| Anthea | Yeah and there’s a quote, I don’t know where it’s from actually. That the world doesn’t need a few people being zero waste, it needs everybody doing a little bit and I think that the great thing about Plastic-Free July is that when you start trying to avoid plastic, then you see it everywhere and then you can’t unsee it. So once you start avoiding it, then lots of behaviours will continue to change after that month. |
| Sally | Have you guys got stories of your own efforts to try and reduce plastic? |
| Anthea  Helen | Yeah. |
| Anthea | Plenty. |
| Helen | So I came reducing plastic through palm oil and I was living in Bangladesh and Nepal for a year and there, like in Indonesia and other places, there’s not the systems for disposing of waste but there’s a lot of single-use plastics that are now being available. So you see all the rubbish, you see it in the rivers and you see it everywhere, and I came to realise that in New Zealand we produce far more rubbish but it’s taken away so we don’t ever have to confront it. And I learnt about palm oil and the rainforest being cut down to make palm oil to put into our foods and our cosmetics, so I went off to the supermarket to not buy things with palm oil but that meant I had to read the back of everything to see if it had palm oil in it and learn all the names for palm oil and I thought, oh it’d just be easier just not to have things in plastic. So I thought well I’ll just do that instead and then I’ll avoid palm oil on the side. |
| Anthea | And that’s the thing I guess, is if you’re buying stuff in bulk and making stuff yourself from scratch then you know what’s in it so it’s easier to avoid palm oil because you just don’t put it in. |
| Helen | Yes, I don’t have a thing of palm oil in my cupboard. |
| Anthea | For me, my background is in marine conservation and I love the ocean and then never really actually connected my individual behaviour with the impact on the ocean. So I thought that the things that were going to destroy the world were people hunting whales and I wasn’t hunting whales. But then when I had a child I realised that there’s actually… Like, I had a massive amount of guilt for bringing another person onto the planet and all of the waste that that produces and then I felt responsible for doing something about that. So just started reducing stuff at home and I never actually did like a Plastic-Free July one-month challenge, it was more that it was when I ran out of something I would replace it with something more sustainable. So it was like playing the long game and it’s been four years and I’m still trying to avoid things here and there but yeah, I’ll get there. |
| Sally | I think that’s probably a good way of looking at it is, it’s not about doing it right now but those incremental changes. |
| Anthea | Yeah and the hardest bit for most people is starting. So if you just take the month and say oh I’ll change one thing in Plastic-Free July and then go from there, I think it’s a lot more manageable. Because it’s really easy to get bogged down and feel really disempowered and give up. So I think just do what you can where you can, yeah. |
| Ross | Yeah look for me, I think it’s just an awareness and being conscious of what you are purchasing and what you are using. But again for me and from the Council’s position it is the long game, it’s not just July, it’s really just looking at how do we make those permanent changes that are going to give us the longer term results that we need in the reduction in plastic and the ongoing effects of that in the environment. |
| Sally | Ross, you mentioned that the council have been no longer recycling plastics… which numbers? |
| Ross | Ah so we’ll only be doing 1s, 2s and 5s. So that takes out 3s, 4s, 6s and 7s. |
| Sally | Ok so 3, 4, 6, 7 - what are they involved in? So what things should people… if they’re not looking to contribute further to landfill, what kind of products involve plastics 3, 4… sorry, I forget. |
| Helen | Hard to remember the numbers. |
| Ross | Probably the easiest way because you could get into what their makeup is which is LDPE, low density… |
| Sally | Far too complex. |
| Ross | Yeah or expanded polystyrene, those sorts of things. But I think it’s really to look at those numbers that are… the resin codes that are on those plastics and that can go right back to when you are purchasing, to making decisions around what’s going to happen to this container or alternatively buying product that’s not in containers. It’s a dry product or something of that nature. So yeah really just around those purchasing decisions and being conscious of what you are purchasing and what can be done with that item of packaging when you’re finished with it. |
| Anthea | Can I chime in? The types of things, like examples, would be polystyrene which is awful and isn’t recyclable so don’t buy anything in polystyrene if you can avoid it. And things like tetra packs which are multiple layers. So like cartons, it’s better to just buy things in a recyclable plastic bottle than in a thing that’s made up of multiple layers. There was another example that I’ve forgotten. Oh and soft plastics, yeah, so avoid soft plastics if you can. |
| Ross | One thing that’s probably worth noting is the work around the container return scheme that central government, Ministry for Environment are doing. They are looking all beverage containers. So your tetra packs are not ideal in terms of the current recycling systems but there may be an avenue for them in the future scheme. However, if you have got the option of like a resin code 1 or 2 or 5, we know there is established recycling opportunities in New Zealand. So that would be the decision you’d make. Just as I know some products, the liquid paper cardboard needs to be in that sort of… so there is that food safety aspect which has to be considered as well. |
| Anthea | It’s complicated aye, there’s a lot to it. |
| Ross | Yes, there is, yes. |
| Sally | I suppose cost probably comes into it too, it’s easy, cheap to create plastic in the first place. |
| Helen | Yes, so this is really interesting actually because plastics are cheap to produce because they’re made from a by-product of the fossil fuel industry. So fossil fuels are made chemically into the things we use for energy like petrol in our cars and the bit that’s left over is what is used to make single use plastics. So essentially it’s a waste material from the fossil fuel industry. And so single-use plastics are cheap to make. But again, from a human rights perspective, that plastic in all of its stages in its life cycle disproportionately affects poorer people. So when you construct a plastic manufacturing plant, you construct it in a poorer area and when you have products, if you’re on a local income you can’t avoid the cheap products because you have less choice when you’re purchasing. And when it comes to disposal, we put landfills in poorer areas.  So along the whole process, we are affecting people with fewer options and in New Zealand, Māori and Pasifika people have higher material hardship than Pākehā people. So our, globally, desire for single use plastics affects poorer people more than rich people. |
| Ross | That’s a good point there, Helen, is that the manufacture of the single-use products is that it is directly affected by the price of oil, for example. So where we have a situation during the Covid with the price of oil getting into a negative situation, then the whole viability of recycling… so that recycled resin versus a new-version resin, you know, the manufacturers may make an economic decision to just use the new-plastic resin. And that’s a challenge and influence that we can’t control but it’s a risk to the established recycling systems we have. |
| Helen | I think this is why we need to be thinking more about our consumption of products and moving to a circular economy and less about trying to recycle our way out of this problem. |
| Sally | Perfect spot to have our final song, second and final song before we get into thinking about what can we do, where can we go. We’ve got Jack Johnson, ‘Better Together’ and this is because Jack Johnson is a bit of a plastic-free advocate. I’d also like to think about celebrities getting behind this movement as well, so hence the choice of this particular song. |
|  | **MUSIC BY JACK JOHNSON – BETTER TOGETHER** |
| Sally | This is Speak Up – Kōrerotia and Helen, you just raised the point about how do we get involved ourselves, what do we do. So I’d like to think in this final segment about momentum. You’ve kind of touched on the fact already that you are noticing significant changes since you set up the Rubbish Whisperer for example, the impact of Plastic-Free July globally - those sorts of things. Have you noticed people changing their attitudes recently and what are the positive impacts of these attitude changes? |
| Helen | Yes, definitely so and we talked about celebrities as well. So in 2016 the Rubbish Whisperer brought paper straws into New Zealand for the hospitality industry and I tramped around on the streets trying to sell paper straws to hospitality and a lot of them said no, why would we want them, we use so many plastic straws so it’s not worth us change - which was kind of the point! But if you take from 2016 to 2019, in a three-year period, plastic straws went from being something that nobody cared about to the poster child of evil single-use plastic. And that was because of individuals who realised that plastic straws were unnecessary for most people - so obviously some people with disabilities or other reasons need plastic straws or straws and that’s fine - but it was also picked up by celebrities. So Lonely Whale was an organisation that started in the US with celebrity power that brought the story of single-use plastics through plastic straws to people. And within the space of three years, you had the Queen banning plastic straws on her estates, you had David Attenborough talking about straws, you had hospitality outlets switching to paper and there was just this massive change in three years, it was amazing. |
| Anthea | And to add to that, I think that here in New Zealand the plastic bag ban has made the idea quite mainstream. So everybody was just told you’re not allowed to use that anymore and then from there, everybody has survived and is using reusable bags. But then also then people started questioning everything else. So like oh well why are you banning that and not this or why are these other things not happening and so it kind of just then leads on to people recognising all of the other problems I guess. |
| Sally | I’d also like to talk… Seeing as we’re talking about celebrities, Jacinda wearing a pair of Remix earrings - which is one of your offshoots of Clever Green, Anthea - and I noticed when I checked out your website, they are like booked well in advance, can’t get a pair for a while and kind of the impact of having someone popular and in a position of responsibility and power choosing to make that kind of choice. |
| Anthea | Yeah it’s massive. So I’ve actually just taken a break from making earrings to come here. So orders are still coming. But yeah, I think that the fact that these things so… It was kind of a perfect storm in that all of these things have happened. Like our recycling has been stopped because of Covid for a brief period and people started kind of questioning all of these things and then supporting local businesses has been… is obviously just a great way to buffer the economic blow and so when Jacinda wore some recycled plastic earrings that I had made and she wore them in an announcement about funding for the arts and she said in the announcement go out and support local businesses because it will make all the difference and it certainly did for me. But yeah, I think for me the products before now were more a vehicle for me to educate on recycling.  So I do small-scale recycling which is essentially the same process as commercial recycling so I can say to people this is kind of how it works and these are the things you can do to avoid single-use plastic and these are the problems with plastic recycling and that it’s not a solution. And then the products were a way to send that message out with people so they can take that away with them and if they’re wearing recycled plastic earrings and somebody says nice earrings then you don’t just say thanks, you can say they’re recycled and then tell that story to the next person. So Jacinda wearing them meant that then that has just become massively mainstream and now people are supporting local businesses and supporting sustainably made products and then telling those stories and so I think that it’s a really great example of that kind of reaching more people, yeah, lots more people. |
| Sally | Very cool. I also wonder about the impact of social media, and Helen you were mentioning straws and you know those videos that just went viral probably a couple of years ago particularly I’m thinking the turtles with the straws up their nose and how outraged everybody felt about that and the moral momentum, I suppose. |
| Helen | Yeah the turtle did an amazing thing by having that straw stuck up its nose, the poor turtle. But I think that we… Like I said before, we don’t have to see what happens to our plastic and our rubbish, it just gets taken away and then its fine, it’s kind of how we see it - not on purpose, just because it’s not there - and I think when we see the effect that it has through something like the video of the turtle and you realise that it’s a straw and then you think about the number of times you needed a straw versus the number of straws that just came when you ordered a drink, it makes you realise that our… I mean, that could have been my straw. |
| Anthea | That’s an interesting point, aye, is that I think a lot of people when they put things in their bins, think that they end up where they’re meant to be but there’s potential for… You know, like, I think to myself well I don’t litter so it wouldn’t end up in the environment but there are so many ways… so many points along the process that they could do and so you know, like bins getting knocked over in the wind or whatever. And I think that that video really… I think people kind of know in the back of their minds that there is a problem with litter and that these things in the ocean are killing animals but as soon as there’s actually a video of it everybody is like oh right, OK so it’s not just ignorable. |
| Sally | Just as we finish up then, both Helen and Anthea are involved in promoting circular economies and Ross obviously in your work you’re obviously trying to encourage people to really think about what they’re using and how they then dispose of it as well. So what is it, what are some tips that you’ve got along encouraging people to get on board with these sorts of movements. Not necessarily starting massive but what are some small steps people can take? |
| Anthea | So I think the easiest way, the gateway for circular economy stuff is just to use reusables. So even if a reusable product that you have is made from plastic, so say you’ve got a Keep Cup that’s made from plastic, if you use it multiple times then it’s better for the environment. So even if at the end of its life it has to go to landfill, all of the energy used to produce single-use plastic and then the disposal and all the problems associated with that are then completely avoided. And so that’s a good way to start and then there’s also loads of other things that you can do like finding out about other resources that are available. So things like getting books out from the library instead of buying them or listening, downloading e-books instead of buying them. Yeah, so there’s lots of different, easy, accessible, circular systems. I don’t know if you’ve got stuff to add to that. |
| Helen | Well I would totally agree with using reusables over single-use plastics and I would also say that we should all buy less stuff because the more stuff we buy, the more resources we use, the more packaging it has, the more stuff that has to be disposed of at the end of its life. We just need to buy less stuff and now is a good time to buy less stuff post-Covid when jobs are, you know, maybe not so secure and we have less money. If we buy less stuff, then it’s better for our pockets as well. |
| Ross | Yeah look totally agree with Anthea and Helen. It’s about that reduction, thinking do you really need to make that purchase. If you do, look at the packaging or whether it’s reusable. Where is that going to end up? Probably, too, research and understand what is recyclable - just because you put it in your yellow bin doesn’t mean it’s necessarily going to be recycled, there’s a certain fraction that will go through the process and will end up in landfill anyway so don’t kid yourself if it’s not something that is going to be recyclable. I think we call it ‘wish-cycling’… |
| Anthea | We’ve all done it. |
| Ross | And look we will… we’re just developing our Waste Management Minimisation Plan and that is the focus, is the reduction and moving towards circular solutions for the waste of the resources that we see come through the system so that’s our focus going forward. |
| Sally | So how is that likely to be on a big scale, this idea of a circular economy. |
| Ross | Yeah I think a lot of it will be… If we can get effective legislation, part of that will be for example with the manufacturing of certain products, designing out the waste and ensuring that what has been manufactured is reusable or recyclable. So as an example, if you have got a manufacturer who is making something out of a number 1 resin and you have a manufacturer out of a number 3 that can’t be recycled, make sure there’s a disincentive to that number 3 so they don’t need to be manufacturing in that resin or importing. So what we’re using, what’s in the system has got a circular outcome. |
| Sally | And maybe I should have asked this probably at the beginning of this discussion but what do we mean by ‘circular economy’? |
| Helen | So the Ellen Macarthur Foundation defines it as “designing out waste and pollution, regenerating natural systems and…” What’s the third one? |
| Anthea | Keeping products… |
| Helen | “Keeping products in use.” |
| Sally | Perfect so that’s great to know it can be done on a bigger scale as well rather than just at that individual level. Any final thoughts before we finish up? |
| Helen | I think that everything is connected. We *know* that everything is connected and Plastic-Free July is a great time to start thinking about single-use plastics but everything is joined. So single-use plastics tie into fossil fuels and consumption and human rights and racism and all of these things. So by choosing what we purchase, we can have this massive effect, positive effect on all of those other things. |
| Sally | It’s great to know I think that the individual choice can have an impact. I think it’s easy to think that it’s big business or it’s somebody else who is doing a lot more damage than me. But yeah, to know that your choices do actually matter. |
| Helen | Big business is only big business because we buy their things so if we don’t buy their things… |
| Anthea | Or we hold them to account then things can change. I think that’s the thing that individuals can do certain things that are within their control and then they can call on businesses to change things and they can call on the government to change things. So I think that there’s lots of different things that need to happen at each level. |
| Ross | And I think that’s a personal responsibility too, not expecting someone else to necessarily solve the issues, that understand what you can do as an individual and take that personal responsibility. |
| Sally | Great place to finish up Ross thank you. Kia ora mō te wā, thank you so much for coming in and talking to us and sharing your breadth and depth of wisdom with us on this topic and hopefully this inspires people to take those baby steps to living a bit more sustainably. |
| All | Thank you. Kia ora. |
|  | **MUSIC BY ONE MORE SONG - PLASTIC** |