

To the Editor: Missing the Point

Dick Atlee

Mount Desert Islander letter to the editor

November 30, 2018

<https://www.mdislander.com/opinions/letters-to-the-editor/letter-to-editor-missing-the-point>

Tom Rolfe's letter to the Islander last week concerning ocean plastic pollution was technically correct in its assertion that most of the plastic waste in the ocean comes from Asia and Africa. He decries the plastics-banning ordinances that were recently passed in Southwest Harbor and are moving forward in MDI's other towns. He describes them as "feel-good" efforts that "divert attention" from improving global waste management practices. He buttresses his position with detailed statistics.

But this argument misses the whole point.

Petrochemical-based plastics do not break down. If anything, they break up. The plastic content of the ocean is not recoverable. It is there to stay. And if we do not ultimately stop making such plastics, it is going to continue to build up, both in the ocean and the other 90% of it that is on land. In the end, this trumps any short-term financial or "environmental" benefits offered by Mr. Rolfe's argument for plastics.

Improved management (dumping, recycling, re-using) of a material that is constantly increasing is ultimately not sustainable. It may improve the shuffling around of such a material, but that material will still be wherever it is put. It won't go away. It is appropriately said of "throwing away" that there is no "away" anymore.

Those of us who have been working on plastic bag and polystyrene food-container bans on MDI are not naive fools looking for a feel-good fix. Nor are those who are doing the same thing in the many Maine municipalities that have done this — or, for that matter, in the rapidly-increasing number of other municipalities in the U.S. and in cities and entire countries around the world.

Yes, it's obvious that global waste management is important, and that carry-out bags and styrofoam containers are only a small proportion of the plastics we are forced to deal with all the time.

But again, that misses the point of this effort.

Global waste management is a huge problem that numbs the mind and fosters inertia in most people — i.e., "What can anyone do about such a thing?" Bags and styrofoam, on the other hand, are a part of those plastics over which we can exert direct and immediate leverage as part of an international movement, on a daily basis.

Far from diverting attention from waste management, having to constantly use re-usable bags keeps attention on that problem. And requiring the use of potentially compostable alternatives to styrofoam ultimately brings down the cost of those alternatives and increases options for composting them — i.e., it improves waste management.

Dick Atlee

Southwest Harbor