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## There is no right way to be sustainable

### Two Different Lifestyles



### Both Are Sustainable And Valid

Written by Shruti Rajkumar

Reduce, reuse, and recycle are the three steps most people were taught in grade school to help the environment. But with the increasingly pressing issue of the climate crisis in the past decade, environmental education has evolved from these three mere words to bans on plastic straws without thoughts of accessibility or the disabled community.

Environmentalists have urged the greater population to make drastic and sustainable lifestyle changes such as transitioning away

from plastic straws. However, many of these mainstream alternatives and steps pose accessibility challenges for people with disabilities and low-income households, and should therefore not be pushed onto everyone universally.

Annie Segarra, a disability activist, said that plastic straw bans are dangerous for disabled people because plastic straws are medical equipment and alternative options have proven to be inaccessible for some disabled people. In an [IGTV video](#), they talk about how creating legislation around plastic straws is dangerous for communities that rely on them, and the campaigns against plastic straws have actually created stigma for disabled people and thus made them targets of harassment.

“I have some personal examples in my life of people who sometimes cannot lift a heavy glass, that includes myself because I have Ehlers-Danlos Syndrome and I have chronic joint and muscle pain,” Segarra said in an IGTV video. “Oftentimes, it is very difficult or very painful for me to hold a cup, so in those moments, I do need a straw to drink.”

This ban on non-plastic straws has become one of the major sustainable practices in recent years. According to a 2018 article by [Business Insider](#), California became the first state to ban plastic straws at restaurant tables in 2019, and Seattle became the first city to ban single-use plastic straws and utensils entirely. Corporations such as Starbucks have recently replaced single-use plastic straws with recyclable, strawless lids.

Many environmentalists support plastic straw bans and encourage people to transition to alternative non-plastic straw options such as metal, paper, or bamboo straws. However, Segarra said that these alternatives to plastic straws don't suit all needs or all disabilities, and many of them are injury risk, allergy risk, choking hazards, and difficult for disabled people to clean.

“Plastic disposable bending straws are the most accessible due to their sterilization, their adjustable positioning, durability, and safety,” Segarra said. “Reusable straws also require the cognitive ability to be able to remember them when going out. But someone not having a straw on their person when out at a restaurant shouldn't mean they can't be a patron. Does that happen when people forget their reusable coffee mugs at home?”

Organizations such as [Lonely Whale](#) have openly expressed their support for a transition to non-plastic straws. In 2017, they created a movement and social media challenge called [For a Strawless Ocean](#) and #StopSucking to encourage people to stop using plastic straws. Such environmentalist groups and individuals believe that these actions can contribute to a larger impact, and they emphasize how easy and small these lifestyle changes are. However, this one-dimensional perspective—promoted not only by Lonely Whale but many other organizations and campaigns—overlooks accessibility for the disabled community and results in new methods of discrimination.

In 2016, a [Twitter post](#) of a photo of pre-peeled, plastic-packaged oranges with the caption “If only nature would find a way to cover these oranges, so we didn't need to waste so much plastic on them,” went viral and prompted online controversy.

According to an [NPR](#) article, Jennifer Hacker, a woman with peripheral neuropathy and poor grip strength, said that pre-prepared foods are a lifesaver for people with mobility issues, noting that she had to stop cooking anything that involves cutting or chopping due to pain.

Hacker said she got angry that people online attacked disabled people for wanting prepared foods.

“I had people on Twitter tell me that I had gotten along without peeled oranges before,” Hacker said. “I had another person tell me that I should just ask someone else to peel an orange for me.”

While reducing plastic consumption is essential in combating climate change, it shouldn't come at the expense of disabled people's access to daily necessities. Additionally, pushing a universal concept of what sustainability is or should look like has been proven by the disabled community to be harmful because it fails to consider various disabilities and conditions that may not be able to commit to such a lifestyle.

Many mainstream environmentalists and individuals also encourage veganism as a sustainable practice because of the excess

carbon emissions caused by meat consumption, however this is inaccessible for some. In 2020, TikTok creator, known by her user [@thatveganteacher](#), started making videos promoting veganism and denouncing those who aren't vegan. According to a recent article on [Medium](#) by writer Zo Sajjad, the delivery of the Tik Toker's message is very aggressive and doesn't acknowledge people who have spoken out against her, saying that they can't be vegan due to health conditions.

Although veganism is possible for some people, others within the disabled community are unable to take up this lifestyle or even incorporate a meatless meal plan; therefore, nobody should be pressured into it.

Another mainstream sustainable trend that gained popularity in recent years is thrift shopping. Thrifting has many environmental benefits such as the reduction of mass production and reusing items that would otherwise end up in landfills. Sustainable shopping practices such as thrifting are difficult for disabled people to partake in when they rely on online shopping and affordable clothing.

Mainstream sustainable clothing stores are typically more expensive, which creates inaccessibility for disabled people and low-income people. Reusable fashion and other sustainable fashion practices at the forefront of the environmental movement are not affordable for everyone.

There isn't just one universal way for disabled and low-income people to be environmentalists. Instead of pushing these practices universally and policing others on how to be sustainable, it's important to educate people on alternative practices that deviate from mainstream trends and are accessible to more people.

Intersectional environmentalism allows for out-of-the-box thinking in reducing plastic consumption, which can replace pushing potentially inaccessible mainstream practices on to people. Legislation—such as a plastic straw ban—that would deny a disabled person accessibility on the basis of environmentalism shouldn't exist. Instead, plastic cup alternatives could be encouraged, as that would reduce the amount of plastic waste and consumption more than a ban on plastic straws.

If a disabled person can't switch over to non-plastic straws, they can do their part to help the environment in other accessible ways such as by ordering groceries from a [zero waste](#) online grocery store.

Additionally, period panties are another sustainable environmentalism practice that are significantly more accessible for disabled people who struggle with dealing with menstruation hygiene.

Environmentalism shouldn't exclude certain communities, and they should be able to partake in the movement in whatever ways that are accessible to them. If an individual is capable of doing mainstream environmental practices such as reducing meat consumption or switching over to non-plastic straws, then they should. However, these practices shouldn't be pushed on people universally with no consideration for potential inaccessibility.

At the end of the day, everyone should be on their individualized sustainable lifestyle journey, and every contribution, no matter how small, counts towards a greater impact.

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