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Editorial corner – a personal view

Disposable or single-use plastics? Neither! Recyclable or reusable plastics!

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It is more and more often said that plastics pollute the environment, therefore they should be banned. Unfortunately, many people confuse two things: pollution and waste. Nowadays overconsumption is very high and it is accompanied by pollution. Most pollution is caused by the burning of fossil fuels, such as oil, coal or natural gas, which also increases the amount of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere. This in turn increases average temperature, which causes the water level of oceans to rise. What can be done about it? We should decrease our hunger for energy, a large proportion of which is used by transport – an enormous amount of energy is used to power the vehicles. The solution is simple. On the one hand, lighter vehicles need to be made, which use less fuel, resulting in reduced emissions. This, of course, requires plastics, as plastics are much lighter than conventional materials. On the other hand, vehicles should be powered by electricity, not fossil fuels. However, a basic misunderstanding is that electricity does not pollute the environment; if the whole ecological footprint of electric vehicles is considered, including their production and recycling, and also the source of the electricity they use, it becomes obvious that they also greatly contribute to pollution. In many countries, most electricity is produced from fossil fuels. Therefore, the proportion of renewable sources in the production of electrical energy should be increased, but for example, to utilize wind energy, lightweight wind turbines are needed, so the blades must be made from plastics. And there are many other areas where plastics are necessary.

Does this mean then that there is nothing wrong with plastics and they do not pollute the environment? Yes, there is a problem with plastics but not because they pollute the environment. It breaks one's heart to see photos of animals injured or killed by plastic products thrown away irresponsibly. It is terrible to see plastic islands floating on oceans and plastic waste flooding our cities and towns. It is a sin to sell a little pendrive in a large plastic box or put a single can of beer in further plastic packaging. But is the plastic itself responsible for these sins? No. It is us, people, who are responsible. We throw away plastic waste, we litter, we use unnecessary packaging. Laws are needed to properly regulate this, and it is equally important to teach people not to throw away unwanted plastic products but collect them selectively. It is important to change bad customs and even to change the way we speak about this. People shouldn't say 'disposable plastic product' because nothing is disposable. They shouldn't say 'single-use' because we should strive to use everything many times.

Therefore, light plastics are greatly needed and they should not be banned because they greatly contribute to sustainable development – their use should be increased instead. Their application in the vehicle industry, energetics, medical supplies etc. is indispensable to reduce emissions and pollution and improve the quality of life for people. This, however, requires a proper recycling (and reuse) strategy and a radical reduction in throwing away unwanted and unusable products.

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