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Before you dispose your face mask, please cut the straps first

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It is becoming a disaster-waiting-to-happen — the tons and tons of face masks (and other medical related items like gloves and PPEs) piling up all over the world each day as the pandemic continues. The number is so shocking as a study revealed that at least 100 billion face masks (and 65 billion plastic gloves) are discarded each month!



Disposed face masks are finding their way to our beaches, destroying the habitat of sea animals. Though each face mask is light as a feather (it weighs at least four grams), the sheer volume of waste is catastrophic to the environment. These face masks find their way on the road, in canals, in the mountain, or in bodies of water. When these “infiltrate” the habitat of land or sea animals, disaster happens. The feet and neck of animals can become entangled with the straps of the face mask, preventing their flight or barring their ability to swim, causing avoidable death.

A recent trending post from the Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (RSPCA) of the UK revealed countless cases of wildlife entangled in straps of face masks. The group launched a campaign to encourage people to “snip the straps” before disposing of the face mask.



The RSPCA organization in UK launched a ‘snip the straps’ campaign to remind people to cut off the straps before discarding a face mask. Otherwise, these face masks pose a real threat to wildlife, including sea life. (Photo from RSPCA)

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The chief executive of RSPCA, Chris Sherwood, issued a public statement, calling on the support of the public. “We have dealt with a heartbreaking 900 incidents of animals caught in litter since the start of lockdown – including animals tangled in face masks. For many years, the public have been aware of the message to cut up plastic six-pack rings before throwing them away to stop animals getting tangled in them, and now we are keen to get out the message that the same should be done for face masks, too – as very sadly, animals are susceptible to getting tangled up in them.”

He added that since face masks are the norm, and may be for some time to come, the group's message is more important than ever as thousands of these masks are being thrown away every day.

“We're concerned discarded face masks could become a significant hazard, particularly to wild animals and birds. We have had to rescue animals from getting tangled in face masks and we expect that this may go up as time goes on, so the best thing to do is to simply cut the elastic ear straps in half before throwing it away.”

What can we do to help the environment?

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So, aside from cutting the straps of our face mask, what should we do to help protect the environment and prevent this so-called “Green Pandemic” from unravelling? Here is a list we compiled from recommendations of health and policy experts.

Do not dispose face masks in public spaces. Be responsible. Throw them in bins or waste baskets.



A message circulating online asks for this small request—“**Kindly cut used disposable masks into two pieces before putting them in the bin.** There is a huge market where discarded masks are sold to the poor. It will take barely five seconds to cut them into half.

Your action can save hundreds from getting infected.” Whether this is true or not, it’s prudent to be extra safe and avert any health crises.

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Eco groups, however, say that even though we dispose of our face masks properly in bins, these could still end up in our seas and landfills. They recommend that we “should just **avoid single-use face masks, if possible.**”

A medical expert has this advice: “**Unless you are in the medical field, it is practical to use a reusable face mask**, which can be worn and washed again and again. It also saves you from the cost of purchasing face masks.” So if wearing face masks is now part of our lives, isn’t this a wise (and budget-friendly) advice?



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In terms of government policy, the Climate Change Commission (CCC) is calling on the implementation of Administrative Order No. 22-2013, issued by the Department of Environment and Natural Resources (DENR), **on the proper management and disposal of used masks, PPEs, and other considered hazardous (infectious) waste from hospitals, barangay health centers, and clinics.** “We stress the importance of enacting the Ecological Solid Waste Management (ESWM) Act of 2000, which provides guidance on proper segregation at source, transportation, storage, transfer, processing, treatment, and disposal of solid waste and other waste management activities that do not harm the environment,” the agency said.

Like face masks, **we can also cut our own plastic wastes by refusing disposable plastic cutlery** (especially when having food delivered) and by **supporting businesses that offer more sustainable delivery packaging**, such as cardboard or compostable bags. “The biggest challenge in adopting a more sustainable lifestyle is breaking old habits and making sacrifices for the climate and environment,” says the CCC. “But by slowly incorporating sustainable practices into our everyday activities, we would be able to protect both the health of the people, natural systems, and the planet.”

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