

Grasping at straws (to start)

Foundation hopes month-long push to reduce plastic straw use is just the beginning



Actor, environmentalist, and Lonely Whale Foundation co-founder Adrian Grenier speaks to the media during the 'Strawless in Seattle' launch at the Seattle Aquarium on Sept. 7. Photo by Joe Veyera

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Seattle Port Commissioner Fred Felleman speaks during the Strawless in Seattle launch at the Seattle Aquarium on Sept. 7. Photo by Joe Veyera

Diners at more than 200 Seattle-area establishments may notice something missing this month with their drink.

But the Lonely Whale Foundation has much bigger aims for its new campaign, with Thursday marking the official launch of the "Strawless in Seattle" effort, a month-long push to get people to "stop sucking."

Through single-use plastic straws, that is.

In the U.S. alone, approximately 500 million plastic straws are used each day, a figure Lonely Whale executive director Dune Ives calls an "almost unbelievable number."

But, she said during an event at the Seattle Aquarium, they're not "anti-straw."

"We're just anti-plastic straw."

The goal for 2017 for the foundation was to remove one day's worth — the aforementioned 500 million — of plastic straws from the marine environment. Ives said Thursday that even if the foundation were to stop enlisting Seattle restaurants for the month, more than one million would be eliminated over the course of the September in the city alone. That's achieved by only offering straws on request, and replacing those that are used with marine-degradable paper straws that decompose in a matter of weeks.

But why start with Seattle?

"We wanted an easy win," said actor and Lonely Whale co-founder Adrian Grenier, "to show that it's possible, to create that model so that we can replicate it around the country."

He also pointed to the city's history of environmental stewardship.

"I feel like the mentality is very optimistic, and they've seen success, so they believe that it's possible," he said. "We just need to replicate that sense of optimism around the country."

It didn't hurt that Ives is from Seattle, either.

And thus far, the response has been substantial.

"You always hope for the best and try not to count your chickens," Grenier said, "but we're happy that we're counting a lot of chickens this time."

Among the local entities to take part are both the Seattle Mariners and Seahawks —with the latter committing to paper straws at all events moving forward at both CenturyLink Field and Events Center.

"We understand our reach," said David Young, senior vice president of the Seahawks and First & Goal Hospitality. "The 12s, our fan base, is the best in sports, and we understand that with that reach comes a big responsibility."

More than two-dozen dining tenants at Port of Seattle facilities, including both Chinook's Restaurant and the Highliner Pub at Fisherman's Terminal, have also committed to a strawless month.

Seattle Port Commissioner Fred Felleman called joining the effort a "no brainer," saying the move makes sense, "if we're going to be able to live up to our aspirations of being the cleanest, greenest, most energy efficient port in the nation."

Columbia Hospitality, which operates Bell Harbor International Conference Center on the Seattle waterfront, among others, is also making the switch from plastic straws.

"All of us see the generational value of being responsible stewards of the planet," said Roy Breiman, the company's director of food and beverage.

Though the campaign itself only runs through this month, Seattle will soon embrace a plastic straw-free future. While many participating restaurants plan to make the switch permanently, Mayor Ed Murray said Thursday that Seattle Public Utilities director Mami Hara, "will make a rule so that plastic straws are included in the things that we will be proactively eliminating from our environment."

The city council originally approved an ordinance in 2008 to ban polystyrene (Styrofoam) take-out containers at food-service businesses, with a planned expansion to cover plastic utensils and containers two years later. But at the time of the original ordinance, Murray said, there was no equivalent to the plastic straw on the market. That has since changed, and the yearly exemption made to the law for straws will not be renewed at the end of next June.

And while Seattle is the starting point, the Lonely Whale Foundation is planning to reveal its next set of "strawless cities" at the end of the month.

Grenier sees plastic straws as a gateway, "an easy, accessible entry point for people to see the plastic problem." As far as convincing people to take that first step? He harkens it to a lesson he learned as a child.

"My mother taught me at a very young age to take care of my own environment; to clean my room," he said. "She said it was very important to make sure that I had a nice, tidy space for me to think and operate and live. And now that I'm an adult, I recognize that my room has expanded — not just to my house but also to my neighborhood and the world at large. This is our home. And listen to your mother; clean your room."

To learn more about the "Strawless in Seattle," campaign, go to www.strawlessocean.org/seattle. To comment on this story, write to QAMagNews@nwlinc.com.