Red Cups

Contributed by Dani Ito
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University of California, Santa Barbara - As I wade shin-deep through piles full of crunching plastic, all I see is red. Shiny, fire-engine red that has become oh-so familiar. But for now, the living room is unrecognizable. A fort has accumulated out of stacks of red plastic party cups. Solo, Kirkland, Dixie, Hefty -- the gang's all here...
all two thousand and thirty of their cups, to be exact. They sit, impatiently scarlet, waiting to be turned into some masterpiece of the recycled-trash-art genre. The task seems insanely daunting, or maybe just insane. How did I get into this mess?

The mission was simple: conduct a little experiment to see just how many of those red cups are generated in Isla Vista [IV, the student town adjacent to UCSB] over any given weekend. Armed with a family-sized box of trash bags, rubber gloves, and a couple of very loyal friends, we set off down the 6600 block of Del Playa Drive, one of the most notorious hangouts of the infamous red cup. Knocking on every door along the ocean side of the street, we met our neighbors, explained the project, and took their generous donations of all the cups they used the previous night. Really, if you're looking for a way to make some new friends in IV, try offering your party cleaning services door-to-door; the general population seems pretty receptive to it.

Some were dripping in jungle juice, some half-full of stale beer, some completely destroyed; then there were the obligatory ash-tray red cups, but mostly there were cups that were almost perfectly clean and otherwise reusable. No matter the state of the cups, they had a common destination: the good ol' Santa Barbara landfill. When I explained the project up and down the street, people were prompt to inform me: "It's OK, we recycle all our red cups."

The sad truth of the matter is that Santa Barbara County does not recycle the type of plastic red cups are made of. Essentially, it is the same stuff as Styrofoam, the out-dated material used in all take-out food containers of previous decades until people realized how bad it is for the environment. As a generation that was brought up to "Reduce, Reuse, Recycle," most of I.V.'s student population sincerely believes they are doing their duty by placing the debris of last night's party in the blue bins. The standard red cup, however, is inscribed with a deceptive recycling symbol, but also numbered 6PS, standing for Polystyerene, the type of plastic that cannot be recycled [not in Santa Barbara. -ed.].

And so the hundreds of thousands of cups used and rejected on the streets of Isla Vista find their way to the landfill to rot indefinitely. At least, this is the fate for the majority of the 2000 cups we collected from sticky weekend aftermath inside the houses. Many, however, were rescued from gutters, dumpsters, and cliff-side yards where they hung perilously above the beach below. Plastics in this quantity blowing from backyard parties into the ocean continually, year after year, has surely impacted the surrounding beaches--not to mention that great swirling vortex, the Great Pacific Garbage Patch, out in the ocean we love.

We're a community of students who have a reputation for being committed to the environment and to having the absolute best time possible in the best location possible. So why do we continue to trash the town and beaches we love relentlessly every weekend? For a good time? Surely we're entitled to have a good time. But we can do it in a sustainable way. It just takes stepping out of the typical I.V. mindset and thinking about some alternative options.

Stats (based on the amount of cups collected on one Saturday and Sunday of Fall Quarter):

! 2030= number of cups in this sculpture, collected over 1 weekend from the ocean side of the 6600-block of Del Playa Drive.

! 6090 = number of cups used on any given weekend just on the ocean side of Del Playa (excluding the 6800 block).

! 316,680 = number of cups used over the weekends in 1 school year on Del Playa alone.

! 108 = number of cups each person uses in 1 school year if he or she uses 3 red cups per weekend.

! 432 = number of cups each person uses in 4 years in I.V. at a rate of 3 cups per weekend.

! 20,000 = population of I.V. (Isla Vista)
! 22,240 = total number of cups sold at the Goleta Costco and Albertsons in 1 weekend.

! $1050.11 = amount spent at those two stores on red cups in 1 weekend.
! 700 = number of UCSB students majoring in Environmental or Hydrological Studies.

What can you do instead?

• Play water pong! It's just like beer pong, but much cleaner and more hygienic. Fill the cups with water instead of beer, and each time someone makes a shot, drink a third of your side drink. The game is the exact same, but the cups stay clean so you can reuse them throughout the entire year. You save money and the environment while decreasing your likelihood of picking up diseases!

• Skip cups altogether and buy cases of beer. The cans are recyclable and many of I.V.'s local can collectors will be more than happy to take them off your hands the next day.

• Break the mold! Buy different cups. Several brands such as Solo make cups that are recyclable (though they may not be red). Just check the bottom to make sure it has the recycling triangle with a number 1, 2, 6 or 7 -- NOT 6PS -- before you buy it!

• Petition your local stores to stock more cups that are made of recyclable plastic. They're the ones that can determine our choices by giving us more options.

• When you're drinking at home or at a friend's place, try to use kitchen cups, or even bring your own flask! Washing and reusing is always cheaper and more sustainable than using a disposable cup.

• Spread the word and host a BYOC -- Bring Your Own Cup -- party! Tell everyone to bring a plain cup from their kitchen and offer Sharpies to decorate with. Everyone gets a pimp cup they can show off at all future parties.

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The above article originally appeared in the current edition of the UCSB student magazine Word, edited by Hector Diaz.

To learn more about the plastic plague, see the award-winning documentary Our Synthetic Sea (available in Spanish too) available from the Algalita Marine Research Foundation and read Culture Change articles on the plastic plague.

Polystyerene background: it is very rarely recycled, for technical reasons and low value. First made from a tree in the 19th century, polystyerene became an industrial product through the Nazi-associated corporation IG Farben (now Bayer, BASF and Agfa). The name Styrofoam is Dow Chemical's polystyerene. In Germany today polystyrene is collected as a consequence of the packaging law (Verpackungsverordnung) that requires manufacturers to take responsibility for recycling or disposing of any packaging material they sell. See wikipedia

Dani Ito [photo below] is in her senior year in Environmental Studies (with writing as a minor) at University of California at Santa Barbara. She points out, "This is the school that got the environmental movement going after the 1969 oil spill, and the school that began environmental studies. But today environmental consciousness is not high on the average student's list of priorities. I think it's important to help open the eyes of not only my peers, but the community at large, as to why we should move away from the world of plastics toward real sustainability."

Publisher's Note: the students of Isla Vista in 1970 took over the student town as a protest against the Vietnam War's expansion into Laos and Cambodia. The Bank of America branch was burned down.

2nd Publisher's Note: Santa Barbara hasn't come together yet to ban plastic shopping bags, as other cities and some countries have done (in some cases to place a fee on the bags). Instead, it has directed retailers to put up signage to advise shoppers to reuse bags. The ocean and its creatures deserve better, but the car-congested town obviously doesn't feel too threatened by petroleum, as proven by the eight offshore oil rigs visible off Santa Barbara.