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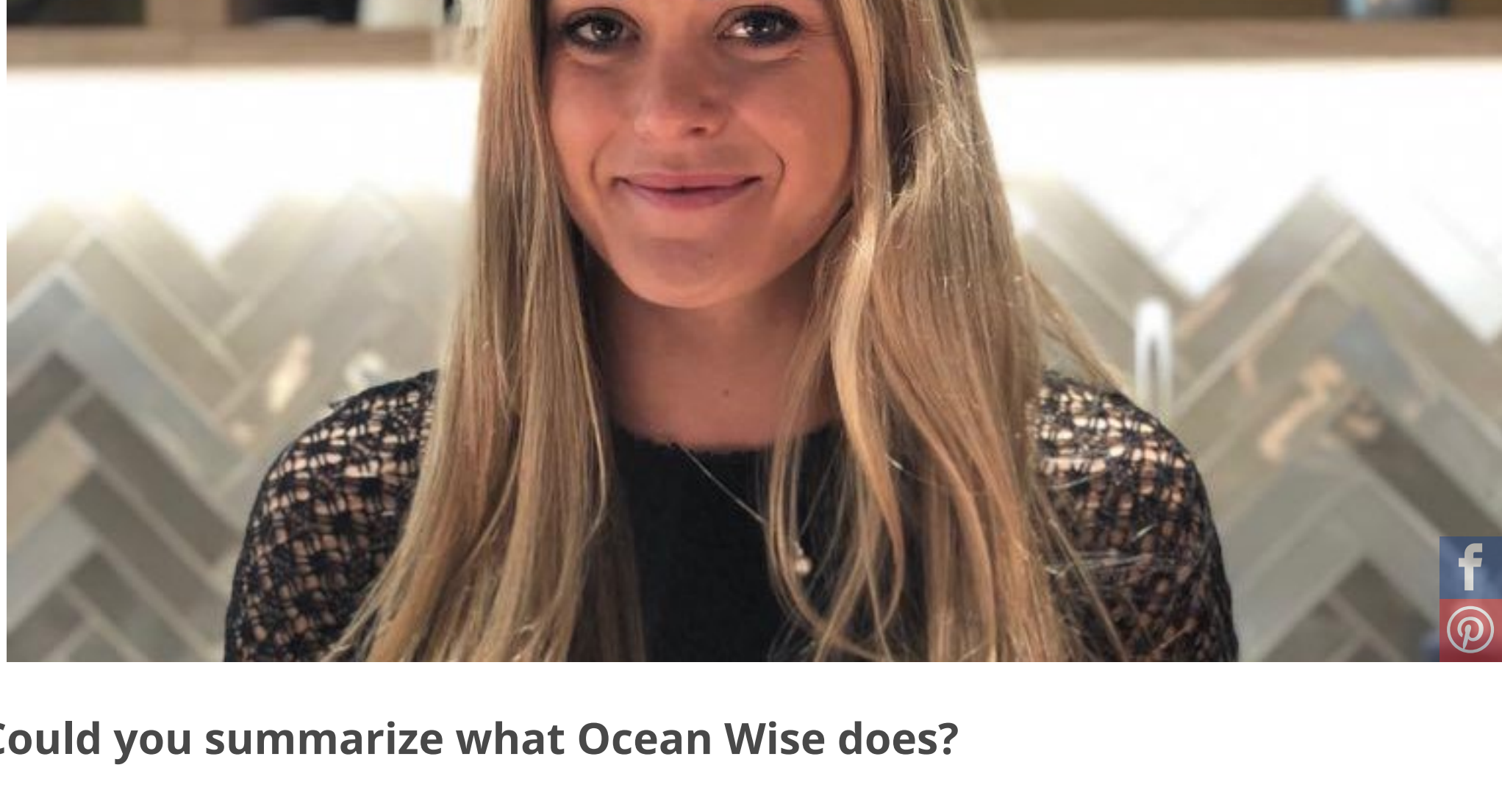
Ask an Eco Expert: Laura Hardman of Ocean Wise's Plastic Free Oceans

by Sheri Radford / Aug 19, 2021

Each year, more than 11 million tons of plastic litter enters the world's oceans

**Ocean Wise** is a non-profit focused on protecting and restoring the oceans through research, education and direct action. The Vancouver-based organization is best known for its successful **Ocean Wise Seafood Program**, which helps businesses make sustainable seafood purchasing decisions. As a pillar of the Plastic Free Oceans initiative, the new **Ocean Wise Plastic Reduction Program** helps food businesses across Canada to reduce their unnecessary and harmful plastic waste.

*We chatted with Laura Hardman, director of Plastic Free Oceans at Ocean Wise, about why food businesses are key to reducing plastic waste, why everyone should care about protecting the oceans, plus more...*

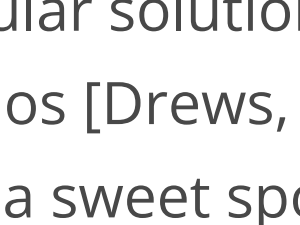
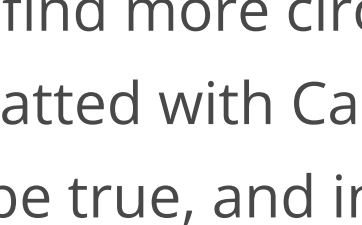


**E911: Could you summarize what Ocean Wise does?**

**Laura:** We are an ocean conservation organization focused on tackling the three major challenges for the oceans right now, which are climate change, overfishing and ocean pollution.

**E911: How did you get involved with Ocean Wise?**

**Laura:** I had grand dreams of being a barrister for human rights and then fell into sustainability and worked for a number of different consumer goods companies. When I moved to Canada last year, I was looking to find an organization whose mission and vision aligned with my own. And I have always been a water baby at heart.



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I've spent the last couple of years of my career working with the Plastics Pact in the UK, trying to find more circular solutions to plastic packaging. When this role came up, and after I chatted with Carlos [Drews, Ocean Wise's director of conservation], it seemed too good to be true, and in a sweet spot for me, so I jumped at the chance.

**E911: What does the Plastic Free Oceans initiative do?**

**Laura:** Our overarching goal is the radical reduction of macro and micro plastic pollution in the ocean. What we always ask ourselves is, what is the impact on the ocean and what will the ocean thank us for? And with that challenge in mind, we're partnering with key organizations, businesses and policymakers.

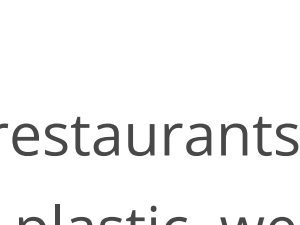
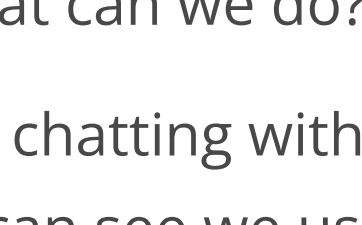
We're looking at the radical reduction and reinvention of unnecessary plastic use. That starts with simply asking yourself the question, do I really need to be using plastic here? All too often we find that plastic is the default. It's such an incredibly useful material that we don't think twice about whether we're choosing the right material or whether there is a credible alternative.

That doesn't just mean swapping, for argument's sake, from plastics to paperboard. What that means is rethinking: Is there an alternative way I can deliver this product, system or service to the consumer without having to use any resources at all? Because, fundamentally, all resource use is going to have an impact on our planet.

And where we *do* use plastic, we need to be thinking about the circular economy. Any time we use plastic, we need to be thinking about it as a valuable resource. I would use the example of aluminium. Aluminium used to be littered regularly. But now it's worth the best part of \$2,000 a ton. You don't see that littered anymore, funnily enough.

Last but not least, we're stopping the leak. So, where we have identified plastic as being the right material to use, we then ensure that it is not just valued but also captured in this continuous circular system. We're not allowing it to leak out into the world, whether it's through our drains or through littering or by mismanagement.

The other piece that is core and fundamental to what we do is providing the right information to individuals so that they can take action. More broadly, as Ocean Wise, we have a very large and successful education program where we engage with youth, from preschool all the way through to 18- to 30-year-olds in **Ocean Bridge**. We really empower them to be citizen scientists, to get a thorough understanding of what it means to take action and actively participate in working towards the shared goal of Plastic Free Oceans.



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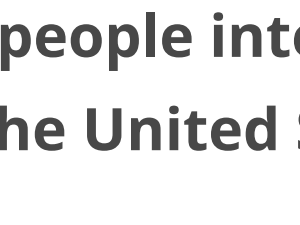
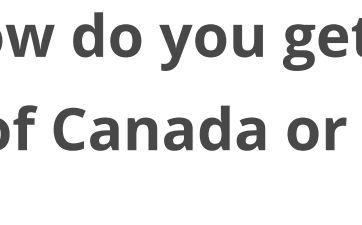
**E911: Why is it so important for Plastic Free Oceans to focus on restaurants and other food businesses?**

**Laura:** I think it was back in 2018, the organization kicked off the **Plastic Wise** campaign. This was aimed at empowering individuals to look at their own plastic use, to try and reduce it, with key tips and examples of what to do in your daily life. The feedback we got from individuals was great, but we also had a number of businesses approach us to say, "Hey, what can we do?"

We were chatting with restaurants, and they said, "We would really like to engage with this, we can see we use plastic, we really want to be part of the solution here." We did some more more digging and more research. As you dig into plastic, you notice very quickly that the majority of plastic making it into the oceans comes from five main product types. That's things like Saran Wraps, flexible packaging from food containers, bottles, plastic bags and foodservice disposables. All of those are regularly used in the the restaurant hospitality sector in large volumes.

It becomes a win-win to focus on restaurants. They really do have a unique opportunity to take action. And they were already in conversation with us, wanting to become part of the solution.





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**E911: How do you get people interested in saving the ocean if they live in the middle of Canada or the United States, far away from the ocean?**

**Laura:** It's not just a problem for the ocean. This is not just about protecting marine species. The ocean being under threat is a threat to humanity.

By polluting the ocean through plastic and other materials, we are fundamentally inhibiting the ocean's ability to draw down carbon from the atmosphere and be part of the battle against climate change. We're fundamentally reducing its ability to provide the air that we breathe, to provide the food that we eat.

Microplastics are getting into our food systems and our drinking water, and scientists are increasingly finding them coming into contact with humanity. Recently a paper showed evidence to indicate that microplastics were being found in human placenta, for example.

This is not just an ocean problem. This is a human problem.

As far as research goes, plastic and microplastic is a new pollution. So we're still trying to understand what the negative implications actually *are* for human health. And that's a really big and, quite frankly, scary question mark for me.

Every shoreline, every watercourse, goes out to the ocean eventually. It doesn't matter if you are in the middle of the US or the middle of Canada. For every shoreline you can think of, litter on that shoreline can make its way out to the ocean.

**E911: How would you respond to an individual or a small restaurant who says, "But I'm just one tiny piece of the puzzle? How does what I do even matter?"**

**Laura:** I would say that every action counts, every time. If everybody says, "Oh, it's just one coffee cup," very quickly that is a billion coffee cups. Every purchasing decision you make, you're voting with your dollars. For small restaurants and small business owners, every purchasing decision that you make is important.

One of the things we've identified is that there is a huge lack of data around what plastic is being used and how that material is handled at end of its useful life, in the commercial sector across Canada and, more broadly, across North America. There really is very little understanding of, if businesses are buying these materials, is it getting recycled? Is it going to landfill? Can it be handled in a different way?

By working with a program like ours, by reporting that data back to us, we can have a high-level picture to better support investments in improving recycling infrastructure, for example, or making the business case for an alternative material to be introduced to market. That, for me, is a huge opportunity for us to take meaningful action.



Never underestimate not only your power as an individual but also the power of contributing to aggregated data.

**E911: According to Ocean Wise, Canadians produce the most garbage per capita. Why do you think that is?**

**Laura:** Full disclosure: I am a very new Canadian. I have only been in Canada since the beginning of the pandemic, so I would hate to pass comments on that.

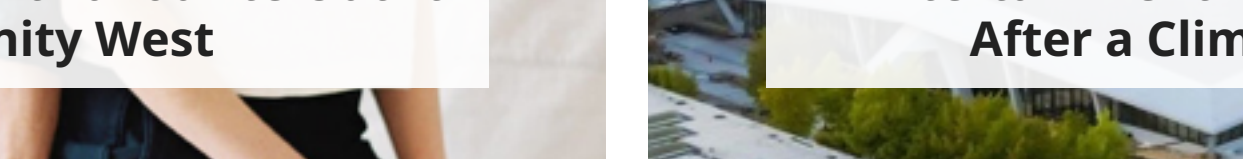
I will say one of the other stats that surprised me was that the sum of recycling in Canada was as low as 9 percent of plastic being recycled. But starting from 9 percent—starting from the worst position—makes it very easy for us to improve.

I feel like it's time for us all to hold up our hands and say, "Hey, we can do something about this," and feel empowered to do something. There's always the small things, like remembering your reusable shopping bag, taking that reusable coffee cup, choosing restaurants that are working with us to reduce their plastic use. It might not feel like much in isolation, but I promise you, it adds up.



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