

## Disposable Face Masks and the Environment

With the outbreak of the COVID 19 global pandemic in early 2020, disposable face masks for other than first responders and health personnel were a scarce commodity. When wearing masks became necessary and eventually required in certain situations (almost anywhere indoors), mass production ensued and disposable masks became available. At the same time, reusable (cloth) masks became available and they also were not inexpensive. Now, most everyone is wearing masks in public and the potential effects on the environment could be catastrophic.

Like many of you, I am a daily walker. As I walk my neighborhood, I am alarmed by the increasing number of used and discarded disposable face masks that I see. There is no rationale for littering, period; tossing used face masks is inexcusable. According to SCIENCE (Aug 2020), "...billions of masks will be needed each month globally. The majority of masks are manufactured from long-lasting plastic materials, and if discarded can persist in the environment for decades to hundreds of years."

The discarded masks are hazardous to people – in some conditions the virus can survive on a discarded mask for up to seven days. This endangers anyone who comes in contact with the mask. The masks are hazardous to land and sea creatures who can choke, become entangled and/or malnourished by eating the plastic. As the plastic breaks down into smaller particles, it enters the food chain and potentially in food that we eat.

For those of us who are not in medical or first response settings, the best option is to wear a cloth face covering. However, even these have environmental impacts, depending on their design and how one cleans them. Machine washing reusable masks that have no filter has the lowest environmental impact.

To reduce the environmental impact of wearing a face mask:

- Use cloth masks without disposable filters and machine wash them regularly.
- Carry a spare cloth mask so you don't end having to buy or wear a disposable mask.
- If you do have to wear a disposable mask, dispose of it properly.
- Don't put disposable masks in recycling.
- Don't litter!