
Encountering plastics in the Caribbean

Contributed by Jan Lundberg
29 March 2008

Culture Change Letter #182 -- One would hope that the plastic disaster depicted in the award-winning documentary "Our Synthetic Sea" would be mainly in the northern Pacific Ocean, the film's area of research. But no, you suspect that there really are monsters under your own bed, and not just "out there" in a horror-movie locale. You're right.

I found out how sad it is in Belize, where the trade winds coming west over the Caribbean nudge the turquoise waters up to the shores of golden sands and mangroves. It's not as bad as sticking your hand in the sand and pulling out countless bits of colored plastics, as seen on MSNBC last November when Captain Charles Moore's research was featured in Hawaii. Here it's more like, "Plastic here, plastic there -- oh, what's that in the sky?" -- yesterday I saw a huge sea bird, a frigate, soaring with plastic fishing line and tackle wrapped around its beak.

There is an awakening in this land, but to really turn the corner would be an immense campaign. Tourist areas post official suggestions to not trash the environment, but the plastic containers and other petrochemical crap are still sold freely, and environmentally aware shoppers use plastic bags needlessly.

I have found Reef Conservation International, Belize branch, to be interested in the plastics issue. But they are already fighting a losing battle with global warming and acidification. Belize has the second largest barrier reef in the world; may it be saved from homo non-sapiens. The Caribbean has for decades been a dumping ground for plastic trash from both cruise ships and garbage hauled from New York to poor islands' dumps.

The regenerative power of nature is such that after Hurricane Iris hit Belize in 2001 -- flattening coastal areas -- you can now see large trees and other plant species flourishing right out of the sand. The life force we all know seems to triumph over the plague of plastics thus far, but there can be a tipping point: plants depend on insects and animals who are in turn impacted negatively by plastics and other forms of petroleum pollution.

It seems coconut palms just need some salty sea water to enjoy that survival edge. But vigorous and cyclical growth, like the sun rising in the east every morning, should not be used as a license to be laid back. (Well, every species deserves be laid back except for our own, given our responsibility to repair and restore.) Alas, a shock is needed with a mixture of fear and some hope for a better way of living. Maybe this will help: