

## Face coverings and our planet by Larry Cooper, Conservation Commissioner

Face coverings have become a part of daily life, which is a good thing when we're out and about in public needing to protect ourselves and others from unnecessary exposure to the deadly virus. But as you've surely noticed, face masks are turning up in other places besides on our faces: sidewalks, streets, beaches, waterways and mountain trails to name several. Most of these "litter masks" are accidents. "Must have fallen out of my pocket, off my ear or fell out of the car when I got out." So, what's so bad about a few face masks?

1. Discarded masks may risk spreading coronavirus-19 to waste collectors or members of the public.
2. Single use masks, the majority of which are made of plastic, are becoming part of the floating trash plague in our oceans and killing marine wildlife. In the Mediterranean, masks have reportedly been seen floating like jellyfish.
3. The loops on discarded masks also threaten terrestrial wildlife, which can become entangled or strangled.
4. Disposable masks break down into microplastics and eventually into nanoplastics. These tiny particles and fibres can accumulate in food chains. Just one mask can produce millions of particles, each with the potential to carry chemicals and bacteria up the food chain and even into humans.

The good news is that we could eliminate the vast majority of discarded plastic masks by switching to reusable cloth masks. Thankfully, this is easy because of the many varieties and patterns of cloth face masks available in our local stores. It's also easy to sew your own face masks or to take advantage of the many organizations and individuals who are producing washable cloth face masks to give away as gifts or sell to raise money for worthy causes. It's best to have a few masks so that you can always have a clean one to wear.

Washing cloth masks couldn't be easier. Simply throw them in with a load of regular wash and you'll have a clean mask along with your clean socks and underwear! And if you need a clean mask and don't have time to run a load of wash right now? Just fill a clean quart or larger container with warm water and a squirt of liquid dish detergent. Let your dirty mask soak for 5 minutes, agitate it in the wash water for a few minutes, and then rinse it out. Then press the mask between 2 layers of bath towel to get out most of the moisture and hang it up to dry.

Together, we can help prevent billions of throw away plastic masks from polluting our planet.

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