

6-12-2019

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Athens, Allison K.. "Junk Raft: an Ocean Voyage and a Rising Tide of Activism to Fight Plastic Pollution by Marcus Eriksen." *The Goose*, vol. 17, no. 2, article 14, 2019, <https://scholars.wlu.ca/thegoose/vol17/iss2/14>.

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Wanting to Recycle is not Enough: One Man's Journey to a Zero-Waste Economy

Junk Raft: an Ocean Voyage and a Rising Tide of Activism to Fight Plastic Pollution

by **MARCUS ERIKSEN**

Beacon, 2017. \$26.95 USD

Reviewed by **ALLISON KATHERINE ATHENS**

Where is “away?” In his second book, American veteran and environmental scientist Marcus Eriksen battles the forces of weather and industry to learn what happens to plastic when it is thrown “away.” Diving into the history, science, and culture of plastic use—and into the Pacific Ocean—Eriksen tells a tale of mounting toxicity in the oceans and our bodies, and business as usual won’t make it go away. *Junk Raft* is a disturbing yet thrilling tale of his journey across the Pacific with his co-captain on their raft made of plastic bottles and other scavenged and donated material. Woven into the story of the men’s trials and tribulations on the open ocean is a history of disposable plastic, the plastics industry’s control of scientific inquiry into the effects of plastic in the environment, and environmental groups’ fragmented response to the mounting crisis.

It’s worth noting that Eriksen isn’t calling for the end of plastic, but for better accountability in plastic’s “end of life” (xi). Eriksen intervenes into the plastics industry’s strategy of “planned obsolescence”—which keeps consumers buying more plastic—to argue for capturing plastic before it ever hits the ground (or water) (12). Instead of upstream design responsibility, however, we have downstream pollution: landfills full of plastic products, fish and marine organisms full of plastic particles, and human and

other animal bodies full of plastic’s chemical byproducts.

The plastics industry relentlessly pushes the narrative that it is the consumer who should carry the negative externalities of plastic production and use (11). Eriksen finds the failure of this narrative literally all around him in the ocean, clogging fish and bird stomachs and his sample net. In his promotion of a zero-waste economy, Eriksen zeroes in on the plastics industry’s obfuscation and misinformation to point out that it is the conditions provided by cheap oil, a strategy of planned obsolescence, and a reliance on waste incineration as the only end-of-life solution at fault, not simply the consumer.

Consumers want to recycle, but the plastics being made are often not recyclable or are for uses that make recycling impossible. Eriksen pointedly states: “global recycling of plastic as we know it is a failure” (84). He explains,

The [Ellen MacArthur Foundation] estimates that of the 78 million tons of plastic used for packaging in 2013, only 14 percent was recovered for recycling. Four percent of that is lost in processing and 8 percent is downcycled into inferior products, leaving 2 percent, or 1.5 million tons of the original volume, brought back into the loop. The other 86 percent not captured for recycling is burned, buried, or washed out to sea. (84)

Part of the problem that discourages plastic recycling is that the “price of new plastic is coupled with the price of oil, so when oil prices drop, virgin plastic is cheaper than recycled plastic” (84). The shale gas from fracking keeps oil cheap, and new ethane crackers, the facilities that turn oil into

plastic, continue to multiply. Eriksen argues that the end-user alone isn't capable of driving the necessary change to make plastics completely recyclable, no matter how much we, as consumers, care (190).

As a scientist, Eriksen is committed to the scientific process. However, he recognizes "bad science," including his own, in which data was collected with "flawed methods or sloppy procedure" (76). "Junk science," the science of misinformation, is not even bad science. It is meant to kill inquiry, sowing confusion, dissent, and distrust in order to keep actual science from informing policy decisions.

Whereas Eriksen constantly works to improve his and others' "bad science," industry representatives release "junk science," while also cherry-picking the science most useful for their narrative. Science, it pains Eriksen to admit, can become politically co-opted when the focus is so narrow that the collected data only confirms ideological positions (75). Eriksen highlights a study that produced good science but was so narrowly tailored that it confirmed an industry position without considering other, potentially disrupting, contexts. The study focused on the biggest plastic polluters, finding that five Asian countries are responsible for almost fifty percent of ocean pollution (176). The study's narrow set of parameters—limited to consumer behaviour and waste management—left out other factors that Eriksen argues need to be part of the waste management conversation, such as poor product design, unrecyclable material, and the contribution of trash pickers to removing the recyclable plastic before it hits the ocean. This study, Eriksen notes, was used to push for expensive infrastructure that requires huge loans to these polluting countries, locking in waste-

volume quotas to assure investor returns. As one NGO representative put it, there is an "unholy alliance between the plastics industry and the waste incineration industry," which obliterates zero-waste strategies that are already producing cleaner environments and jobs for people in polluting countries (177).

Eriksen shares examples of countries like the Philippines that are solving their waste management crises without turning to or supporting the "unholy alliance." The Philippines was the first country to ban incineration nationwide. It now has decentralized waste management and created local material recovery facilities, and is on the road to zero waste (178). In India, waste pickers have long been responsible for turning waste into recyclables, and now they have unionized and won medical care, transforming themselves into "waste managers" (179). In Chile, a new approach to waste in one community diverted more than 20 percent of the waste stream to composting and biodiesel (179). The countries and communities Eriksen profiles are having a positive global impact while solving their local waste problems. They shouldn't have to move economically and environmentally backwards to incineration as their waste management strategy, just to satisfy the plastics industry's bottom line.

Marcus Eriksen's journey in a soda bottle raft across the Pacific is more than an adventure story by an intrepid explorer. Eriksen's background in science and his current research studying plastic in our environment, coupled with the statistics, data, economic information, and historical studies he weaves into his narrative, give a fuller picture of the plastic pollution crisis. *Junk Raft* is a story about science and solutions, and how we, the consumers of

plastics, can rise up together and demand a zero-waste future.

ALLISON KATHERINE ATHENS holds a PhD in Literature from the University of California, Santa Cruz. Her current research interests include tribal sovereignty, cultural property, and the history of contemporary international law. She also often thinks about the ocean.