

Disability rights don't have to clash with environmental responsibility

July 25 2022, by Michelle Hewitt



Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

Picture this. There's a tool you rely on to drink and using it is essential. It's readily available. You're given one with a drink wherever you go, and you can buy it cheaply in many stores. Imagine, then, that this tool is taken away.

It's banned, becomes a hard to find—hidden from view and potentially expensive. Your ability to rely on this tool for your safety just became difficult.

This is the [situation facing disabled people who rely on plastic straws](#) to drink, under [the federal government's newly released regulations on single-use plastics](#).

You may have heard about this before. In 2018, provincial and territorial governments agreed to the [Canada-wide Strategy on Zero Plastic Waste](#).

Now, four years later, with attention switching away from the pandemic, the regulations on [single-use plastics](#) leave [disabled people](#) who rely on [plastic](#) straws abandoned by unnecessary eco-ableism. There is a compromise to be reached.

A case for the environment

The environmental case on single-use plastics is well known, and one that has [scientific and public support](#). Our sidewalks show evidence of discarded single-use plastics, and our landfills are full of plastics that will never breakdown. Our behaviors must change—that's irrefutable.

While deciding how much change needs to happen, the [federal government](#) has concentrated on banning "[the big six](#)"—plastic items that are most regularly found to be polluting our environment such as grocery bags, cutlery and straws.

In a small step towards recognizing the needs of disabled people, there are exceptions. Plastic flexible straws will be available for sale in packages of 20 or more, but [only if they are hidden from view and the customer requests them](#). But they will not be available in restaurants or any place that sells drinks.

For some disabled people, the [flexible plastic straw is life-sustaining](#). Drinking from a cup requires a complex set of muscles to work together seamlessly, from lifting and tipping the cup to your mouth to controlling the muscles required to swallow.

For people with any number of neuromuscular conditions, this complex motion just isn't possible and could lead to complications like aspiration, when fluid enters the lungs and causes pneumonia, or dehydration, when the body lacks the fluid it needs to function.

For disabled people, these complications can lead to death.

Eco-ableism

You may be asking why a flexible plastic straw is needed. What about paper or silicon? Disabled people are resilient and resourceful people. They've [tried out all the different types](#) and know that the flexible plastic [straw](#) is the one for them—[sturdy yet flexible, hygienic, disposable, readily available and cheap](#).

If a [disabled person](#) tells you something works for them, believe them.

There are two contrasting models of disability at work. The single-use plastics regulations are an example of [the medical model of disability in action](#)—a model that is deeply rooted in our societal beliefs, seeing disability as the problem of the individual, so the extra steps that someone needs to take to access plastic straws are their problem, their responsibility.

As disabled writer [Alice Wong says](#): "I live in a world that was never built for me, and every little bit of access is treasured and hard-won. Bans on plastic straws are regressive, not progressive."

In contrast, the social model of disability believes that disability is society's problem. It believes that we need to remove barriers to allow disabled people's full inclusion into society.

In 2019, [the Accessible Canada Act became law, and is built on these principles of barrier removal](#). It talks of disabled people being involved in the design of laws and policies, and the need for barrier-free access to full and equal participation in society—this is missing from the single-use plastics regulations.

We have set up an unnecessary division—environmentalism versus the needs of disabled people—[creating eco-ableism](#). Compromise is the way forward, and already exists in our approach to single-use plastics.

For example, plastic tops for take-out drinks like coffee and pop are not banned, because there is no reliable alternative. The environmental cost of keeping those plastics has been balanced with the need to carry drinks safely. There are compromises available for flexible plastic straws too.

The City of Vancouver [has had a bylaw in place since 2020](#) that was developed in consultation with disabled people who use straws to drink. It allows for flexible plastic straws in restaurants, including the design of a logo to tell disabled people that these straws are available.

And similar examples can be found throughout North America. However, it may be that Canada is the first jurisdiction to introduce such stringent rules on the sale of plastic straws.

Placing [plastic straws](#), a life-sustaining accessibility tool, under the same restrictions for sale as [tobacco products](#) is overly harsh, and detrimental to the dignity and inclusion of disabled people. Compromise is needed between the inclusion of all Canadians and our environmental responsibilities.

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