

India taking responsibility

While it is far from alone in having a huge problem with single-use plastics, the country has made an eye-catching pledge to do something about it. By Huw Kingston

IT TOOK ME QUITE A WHILE TO FIND IT. I'd searched the whole of our luxurious cabin at Reni Pani Jungle Lodge for what is usually so easy to find. Finally, in the bathroom, there it was: plastic wrap around a spare toilet roll. Soap in bars, coffee in jars, filtered water in reusable aluminium bottles, bins lined with reusable canvas bags – someone was paying attention.

We all know that something has to be done about our over-use of plastic, a material that is burying our lands and seas under a glistening blanket laid down to the drumroll of plastic bottles bouncing down the road in the wind. It's no surprise 'single-use' was chosen as the 2018 word of the year by Collins Dictionary.

We'd just arrived at the lodge after a few days trekking and camping in Satpura National Park. During those days, I'd been happy to find little evidence of that most ubiquitous and problematic of materials in a country where it has been so hungrily adopted. Our guides even picked up plastic that they noticed had washed down the Denwa River into the park.

I was similarly impressed when, rafting on the Ganga near Rishikesh some weeks later, our safety kayakers regularly fished plastic bottles from the water.

"Twice a year the rafting companies spend a day cleaning up the river and its banks," Akshay Kumar told me. Kumar was one of the first operators on the river back in the 1980s. He told me there were now over 300.

As the longest and most revered river in India, there is a government-led initiative, The National Mission for Clean Ganga.

"You wouldn't believe what we collect," said Gaurav Chopra of Cleantec Infra, a business contracted to dredge up the flotsam and jetsam of our plastic-infested lives from the Ganga and other Indian watercourses.

India is like an old lover you can't quite get out of your head. Even after years apart, its intensity never truly lets you go and you hope that circumstance might bring you together again. Through the 1980s and 1990s, I was well and truly smitten. In that period I watched the inexorable march of plastic, thrown down with no regard as to where it would end up. Watercourses became choked with the stuff. No one shows off images

of the Taj Mahal seen from across the oil-slick sludge of the Yamuna River, bounded by banks of mounded plastic.

In 2008 I returned for a ski expedition and the problem had worsened. But the first moves were being made to stem the tide. In the state of Himachal Pradesh, plastic bags had been banned and market traders had switched to paper bags, many of recycled newsprint.

Late in 2018, I was back in India for the first time in a decade. Only months before my visit, India had been the host country for the UN World Environment Day and its 2018 theme of 'Beat Plastic Pollution'. On that day, Prime Minister Narendra Modi announced that India would ban all single-use plastics by 2022. It was a stunningly ambitious announcement from a nation with such a huge problem. It attracted



doubters from the moment it was made, but at least it showed vision. If only Australia, my own country, had taken such a stand.

I don't doubt that India will miss its target, but after the announcement, the Confederation of Indian Industry formed the 'Unplastic' initiative with 35 of India's largest companies signing up. Time will tell how deep and lasting their commitment is.

Along with an old friend, Mandip Singh Soin, a founder of the Ecotourism Society of India, I sat down with a spokeswoman for the Delhi office of the UN Environment Programme.

"Already the beverage industry [soft drinks] seem to have convinced the government that PET drink bottles are not 'single-use' because they can be recycled," Jasleen Dhanota told us.

But of course, unlike glass, no plastics can be recycled into the same product they once were, only into lower-grade products. And in many ways recycling is the refuge of the non-committed: it is an unnecessary use of unnecessary resources for often unnecessary products.

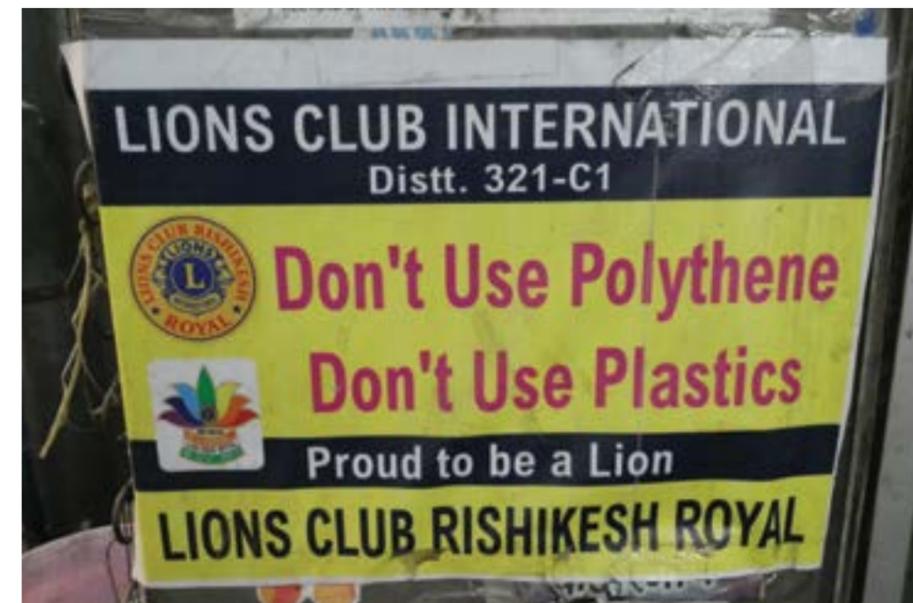
Following the lead (or in some cases, ahead of) the central government, various Indian states have brought in their own plastic bans. Maharashtra (which includes the mega-city of Mumbai), Himachal Pradesh, Odisha and Uttar Pradesh have banned all or some single-use products including bottles, bags, straws, picnicware and cups.

Signs now implore people to give up their



plastic addiction and, in many places on my most recent visit, I saw real efforts being made. Filtered water in rooms or on tours, shampoo in ceramic pots, unlined bins.

But what can the visitor do to help India continue in this positive direction? Firstly never underestimate that you, the individual, are the most powerful agent of change. Travelling with your own reusable bottle, cup, straw and spoon will reduce your impact.



SIGNS OF PROGRESS

The temple sign above reads: 'Please do not use plastic bags because it cause untimely death of cows wandering in the street and choking of sewerage lines. Offerings and garlands that are brought in plastic bags will not be allowed in the temple. Anyway, plastic is not good for humankind.'

But what about drinking water? Remember that in much of India, as in so much of the world, the tap water is as good if not better than what comes in a store-bought, single-use plastic bottle. It is the bottled water industry that sows the seed of doubt for commercial reasons. Many operators and hotels now offer highly filtered water. And if you are still concerned, travel with a Grayl water bottle (www.thegrayl.com) or similar method of purification. This device gives you drinking water free of all bacteria, viruses, chemicals and sediments in a matter of seconds.

In 2018, I found myself not only in India, but in Tajikistan, Jordan, Southern Africa and various places in Europe. In that year I drank safely without using one single-use bottle of water.

So thanks for taking some responsibility, India. Now it's over to the rest of us. **AA**

The author's TED talk, 'Message in a bottle' can be found on the TED YouTube channel. Kingston travelled to India as a guest of the Adventure Travel Trade Association (ATTA).