

Is the environment

Story by *Rosamund Burton*

COVID-19 forced dramatic change upon our lifestyles. Suddenly, for a period, we couldn't eat out and takeaway food was the only option, coffees had to be takeaway and for hygiene reasons the disposable cup was considered a priority. Shop closures led to increased online shopping and all the packaging that entails. Also, when food shopping, many people were choosing packaged items when only months earlier for environmental reasons they would have avoided them. Plus, being at home, people have been cleaning out cupboards and garages, not to mention undertaking garden projects.

Pittwater Life contacted Northern Beaches Council to find out exactly how large a backward step we have taken over the past few months. "There has been an increase in the amount of waste collected, which would appear to be due to people spending more time at home in response to the COVID-19 pandemic," explains Northern Beaches Council CEO, Ray Brownlee.



CUP SWAP INITIATIVE: Sophie Scamps.

He adds that between March and June this year 38,470 tonnes of waste was collected, which was a 14% increase on this time last year.

But it comes at a time when Council is heralding breakthroughs in environmental management.

"Council's new waste processing contract has seen a great percentage of this recovered and a substantial reduction in the amount of waste sent to landfill," Brownlee says. Compared to 2019 the amount going to landfill is down by 27%. In 2019, 18,699 tonnes during the March to June period went to landfill, but this year it was only 13,567 tonnes. And recycling and reuse had increased by 65% from 15,111 tonnes in 2019 to 24,903 tonnes.

That said, Peter Davis, CEO of Kimbriki Resource Recovery Centre, said he had seen a lift in the quantities of plastic containers, bottles, cans and paper, particularly cardboard.

"A lot of drop-off seemed to be cardboard, which I suspect is due to an increase in online shopping."

The Kimbriki shareholders are Northern Beaches Council and Mosman Council and the centre receives mainly household waste rather than commercial.

"Eighty per cent of what comes into Kimbriki, which is well over 300,000 tonnes per year, is turned into another product, and 20% goes into landfill," he explains. "The Northern Beaches community does a great job when it comes to separating waste, so our recyclables are sought after, as they are low in contamination, because people do the right thing."

Kimbriki works with iQ Renew, a recycling company with facilities on the Central Coast, that focuses particularly on innovative solutions for glass and plastic. The glass bottles and containers from the yellow bins are recycled into sand, which is used for building roads, drainage and also for construction. Plastics are recycled to be reused in manufacturing.

At the start of lockdown in March, when the uptake in takeaway coffees increased dramatically, and for health and safety reasons, cafes were advised for hygiene reasons not to accept 'keep cups'. It didn't take long for the council's Swap for Good business program, which supports local businesses to move away from single-use plastics, in collaboration with cafes, environmental health officers and NSW Food Authority to devise healthy, safe alternatives to the disposal cup.

During the lockdown period, Ruby Lane in Mona Vale was one of the cafes using a contactless pour system. Prior to COVID-19 the French Basket in Mona Vale had stopped offering disposable coffee cups, and instead asked its customers to either BYO or use the Huskee Swap System. With COVID-19 the business had to reintroduce disposable cups, but also continued using reusable ones, explains Jacobe Marsh, who owns the café with his partner, Lucile Varnier; they washed



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a COVID casualty?



ON THE RISE: Kimbriki management reports an increase in the volume of plastic bottles.

them in food-grade sanitising solution, then rinsed them in near-boiling water from the coffee machine.

Bilgola resident Rowan Hanley, 49, is heading the Ocean Friendly Program, which Surfrider Foundation Australia rolled out on the Northern Beaches last year. The program recognises and promotes businesses that take action to reduce single use plastics. To be accredited, businesses must not use polystyrene, plastic take away packaging or containers, plastic bags, plastic cutlery, plastic straws, plastic water bottles. The three Todman brothers own the Zubi cafes at Bilgola Beach and Narrabeen with their business partner Steve Hulley who owns Zubi Bar in Newport. They are all keen surfers, and eager to reduce their plastic waste, they

have signed up to the program.

Due to COVID-19, the Surfrider Foundation has not organised any group beach clean-ups over the past few months, but personally Rowan has noticed an increase in plastic waste when she's done beach cleans.

"I've seen more coffee cups and lids."

However, because some businesses have only been able to survive due to their takeaway coffees, the Surfrider Foundation is not promoting the Ocean Friendly program at this time.

"We're just trying to encourage people to do their best," Hanley explains. "If they're getting a coffee please say, 'no lid'. That really helps."

Laurel Wood, 74, is one of the founders of the Avalon branch of Boomerang Bags,

which has been running for four years.

"We estimate that since we began we've distributed about 20,000 bags, and that has saved the use of hundreds of thousands of plastic bags," she said.

However, of late the group hasn't been able to meet regularly to make the bags, as the Avalon Recreation Centre was closed, and the bags could not be put out for the community to use, because having multiple people handling the bags was not safe from a health perspective. However, the group is back making bags and hoping to have them back out in the community soon.

Boomerang Bags, she explains, have been hugely instrumental in people in the Avalon area using reusable bags, but says, she has observed more use of single-use plastics, and a shift away from keep cups.

"But thanks to the council, Plastic Free July and Surfrider, lots of cafes no longer have plastic straws, and have moved to more environmental disposable cups and containers."

Also passionate about the environment and waste reduction is founder of Our Blue Dot, forty-nine-year-old GP and mother of three, Sophie Scamps. Formed last year, the organisation is helping Avalon become a net-zero carbon community.

Realising the increase in takeaway meals and coffees during these COVID times, this month Our Blue Dot is launching reusable, double-walled stainless steel takeaway containers that people can hire, and on returning them either get their money back or swap them.

"Already there are three or four restaurants, and three or four cafes keen to get on board, because they see how much plastic they're using every day. If every restaurant in Sydney, Australia... the world... does this, it saves a lot of plastic."

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OCEAN FRIENDLY: The crew at Zubi, Bilgola Beach; meanwhile the Surfrider Foundation clean-ups across the Northern Beaches are under a COVID hold.

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Two Avalon friends and mums of young children were devastated by the number of plastic bags and quantity of plastic packaging they accumulated from their supermarket online shop. So in June this year, Aimee Hickey and Kat King launched The Pantry Australia, an organic bulk wholefoods online business. The wholefoods are packaged in biodegradable bags, and they also sell a range of glass jars with bamboo lids.

"Now we are using fruit and vegetable shops and good butchers and buying

bulk wholefoods, and a family can really reduce their waste by doing that," Hickey says.

Kimbriki's Peter Davis says the biggest increase seen at Kimbriki during lockdown was of garden vegetation, and that is recycled by Australian Native Landscapes into mulches and soils.

Dan Yakich, owner of New Leaf Nursery at Ingleside, says after initially seeing a huge increase in the sales of herbs and vegetables, that there has also been a great demand for composters and worm farms, which not only produce

natural fertilisers, but also reduce food waste.

In addition, New Life Nursery gives away free mulch and sawdust, and free pots.

"During COVID we've seen the recycling almost double," Yakich says. "I've never seen so much sawdust, mulch and so many pots go."

Despite the increase in waste over this period, the Northern Beaches Council, Kimbriki and the community's commitment to reduce in particular single-use plastic, and our waste in general, is a positive through a daunting time.

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