

Chapter 14

Reducing Single–Use Plastic and Waste: Fantasy or Reality at Disney Theme Parks

Michelle Whitmore

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7721-059X>

Western Sydney University, Australia

ABSTRACT

The tourism industry contributes to and is impacted by plastic waste. The Walt Disney Company (Disney) is one of the largest media and entertainment companies contributing to global travel and waste. Disney theme parks represent a microcosm of society and the conflict between consumerism and environmentalism in the effort to reduce single-use plastic and waste to landfills. Disney has targets to reduce single-use plastic and waste at its wholly owned and operated parks and resorts in France and the United States (U.S.). As a multinational company that operates without a legally binding international agreement on plastic waste, Disney is subject to the plastic policies of each jurisdiction. The policy context in which Disney established its waste targets and the actions taken by Disney to reduce plastic waste in theme parks are discussed in this chapter. Moreover, opportunities to improve waste management practices and shared learning were identified.

1. INTRODUCTION

Disney theme parks represent a utopian holiday destination for many, primarily middle-class families. For some, it is a once-in-a-lifetime experience; for others, it becomes an integral part of the family tradition. Whether you love or hate it, deny-

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ing Disney's impact on popular culture is challenging. The author visited a Disney theme park for the first time in her early twenties and has since made numerous visits, alone and with family. The author finds herself conflicted between her love for Disney and their commitment to environmental sustainability. Apart from the carbon emissions from her long-haul flights, the author found it challenging to limit the waste she generated during her trips to Disney resorts in 2019 and 2020, before COVID-19. The author observed conservation messaging and solar arrays at the parks yet noticed a disconnect between these efforts and the amount of waste produced. This observation led the author to investigate the factors contributing to Disney's stance on plastic and waste. Disney's messaging is environmentally positive; however, Disney makes decisions based on financial incentives as a corporation. The Disney Executive is legally obligated to act in the interests of shareholders, not broader society. However, to continue to make a profit, Disney must maintain favour with its customers and staff, or in Disney theme park parlance, its guests and cast. Lipton (2024) provides an example of Disney taking a stand against state policies in response to cast pressure but notes that in doing so, it was subject to repercussions from the state. This finding reinforces the fact that Disney operates in a political environment. Social, political, and economic factors influence Disney's waste targets and its actions to achieve them. This chapter explores plastic waste, Disney theme parks, and the assemblage of factors that influence decisions regarding plastic use and disposal within the theme parks.

2. THE PROBLEM WITH PLASTIC

Plastic is a term used to describe thousands of materials made from polymers that can be moulded when hot and then set to rigid or elastic form (Meikle, 1995; Freinkel, 2011). Plastics can be used to imitate any material. Some of its early applications include replacing natural products threatened by overconsumption, such as tortoise shells, elephant ivory, and seal fur (Bensaude Vincent, 2013). As a cheaper alternative, plastic products are affordable and widely available. Plastics are daily, and many applications are often unnoticed (Gabrys et al., 2013; Hawkins, 2018). From barely measurable quantities in 1940, it is estimated that approximately 400 million tons of plastic waste is produced each year, half of which is designed to be single-use (United Nations Environment Program [UNEP], 2021).

Every stage of the plastic life cycle, from production to transport, use, and disposal, has negative environmental impacts. Plastics contribute to over 3.4% of global greenhouse gas emissions (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2022) primarily from their production, which relies on the use of residues from oil refineries (Freinkel, 2011). The plasticiser chemicals used

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