

PROFILE

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'Classic Plastic' challenges harmful habits

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A provocative new art installation is challenging Tofino residents and visitors to think about the unnecessary and harmful waste they produce when they buy bottled water.

Beachcomber and debris artist Pete Clarkson collaborated with artist and designer Kim Leckey, Surfrider Pacific Rim and the District of Tofino to put together his latest piece, dubbed 'Classic Plastic,' which is comprised of 565 discarded water bottles and caps.

"Pete is incredible. We're so lucky to have him in the community and I love where his mind goes with things. He can take these pieces that seem like garbage and have no life left in them and use them to create a statement and create awareness," Surfrider Pacific Rim chapter coordinator Laurie Hannah told the Westerly News.

Clarkson explained that 'Classic Plastic' began with a tarp he found in Port Renfrew.

"The frayed fabric reminded me of a plastic waterfall, and the idea of a waterfall of plastic bottles followed closely after. I kept the concept simmering in the back of my mind," he wrote in an explanation of the installation.

"When I heard about Surfrider's 'Take Back the Tap' campaign I thought it would be a great fit. Around the same time, the District of Tofino Arts, Culture and Heritage committee was seeking proposals for public art projects. I saw the opportunity and approached the Surfrider executive about partnering on the proposal."

Clarkson said he's participated in "countless shoreline cleanups" and seen firsthand the destruction single-use plastics are having.

"Adding insult to injury, in many places, including Tofino, bottled water is a senseless substitution for tap water," he wrote. "Yet, while visiting Tofino, many folks still persist in choosing bottled water."

Surfrider's Take Back the Tap campaign was launched in 2020 in an effort to discourage residents and visitors from buying bottled water while encouraging them to take advantage of the community's clean tap water.

"Surfrider Pacific Rim's Take Back the Tap campaign has multiple goals: while eliminating plastic water bottles has been a primary focus, equally important is increasing access to free, clean drinking water and educating consumers on why the water in plastic is often unnecessary," Amorita Adair, Chair of Surfrider Pacific Rim. "Plastic water bottles have always been one of the most abundant items volunteers find on our beach cleans. They contribute immensely to plastic pollution, and the water is often filled with microplastics as well as toxic chemicals leached from the packaging. This art piece created by Pete Clarkson and Kim Leckey in partnership with the District of Tofino and Surfrider Pacific Rim is a fantastic conversation starter and an opportunity to educate people on the quality of the water in the community."

Hannah has a frontrow seat to the reactions 'Classic Plastic' elicits as the piece is located outside her Gaia Grocery store, which is a registered Ocean Friendly Business.

"They stop and they step back and they sort of tilt their head and look at it and read the



Debris artist Pete Clarkson stands next to his latest installation, 'Classic Plastic' outside Gaia Grocery in Tofino. (Photo courtesy of Surfrider Pacific Rim)

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— Laurie Hannah

writing. The amount of people that take photos of it is fantastic. I can see the impact it's having," she said. "It confronts people... I do get people who come in and they're not happy that we don't sell plastic water bottles and they don't understand why. I get it because it can be really frustrating when you're thirsty. We're just encouraging people to think ahead, bring their water bottles. Changing people's habits can be challenging because we're creatures of convenience."

She added that the Take Back the Tap campaign has included the installation of water bottle refill stations throughout the community.

"Not only is the drinking water here safe to drink, it's actually fantastic drinking water," she said.

She added that Surfrider is hoping to add plastic water bottles to its impressive list of restricted single-use plastics, which includes, straws, bags and cutlery, but is working to better understand the infrastructure requirements necessary to make a water bottle ban successful.

"We at Surfrider have been pretty mindful of the fact that we don't want to push something through that potentially affects communities that don't have the infrastructure in place," she said. "It's one thing to take (plastic bottles) away with the ban, but to not have the infrastructure in place for people is not really setting you up for success."

She added local businesses continue to support Surfrider's campaigns to cut down on plastic pollution.

"Each one has gotten easier to have the

business community adopt them. The Cut the Cutlery campaign was pretty easy compared to starting with straws and bags for instance," she said.

"I feel like Tofino and Ucluelet and the surrounding communities attract folks who are really passionate about taking care of their space because there's so much beauty here. We're so connected and we can see so much of this environment right in front of us... There's all these opportunities to get a little bit deeper and closer to nature more easily and that can energize folks to get involved."

She added Surfrider is currently working with local resorts and vacation rentals to provide branded, reusable water bottles to visitors along with information about the local water source and the unnessicity of plastic bottles.

Anybody interested in learning more about Surfrider or getting involved is encouraged to visit www.pacificrim.surfrider.org.