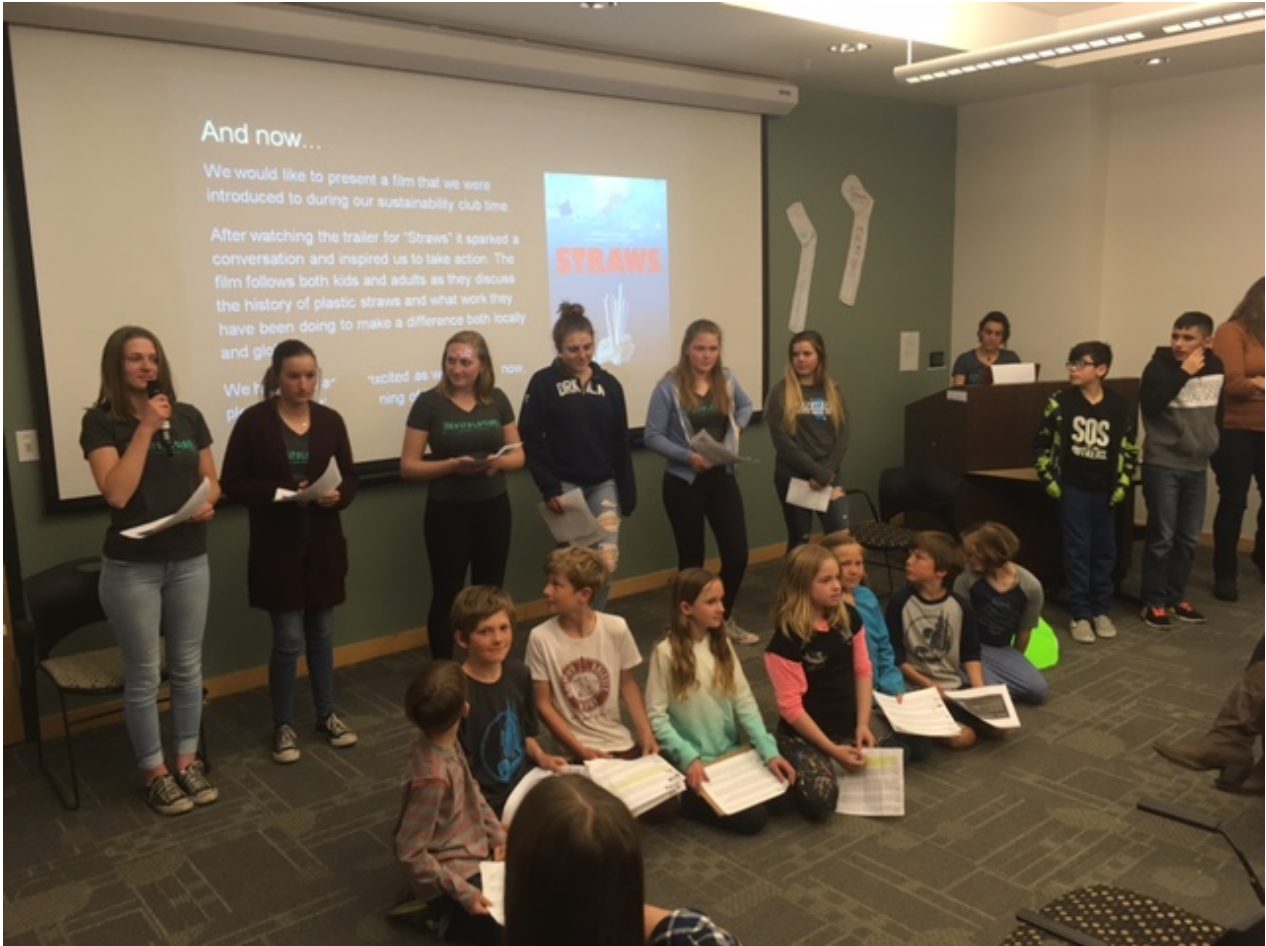


Students spearhead plastic straw ban in Lake Tahoe



Students explain why plastic straws are bad for the environment. Photo/Terra Breeden

By Terra Breeden

INCLINE VILLAGE – It is estimated that more than 500 million single-use plastic straws are used and thrown away in the United States every day. That's enough straws to wrap around the Earth 2.5 times.

Single-use plastic straws are cheap and easy to produce, but they are a menace to the environment. Billions of the seemingly insignificant, plastic tubes are buried in landfills and tossed in the ocean annually. Scientists predict that by

2050 there will be more pieces of plastic in the ocean than fish.

Lake Tahoe youths are mobilizing to cut down on plastic consumption. Students from a variety of schools and programs have united to spearhead the movement to raise plastic-straw-awareness and ban the use of other single-use plastics like Styrofoam containers and shopping bags at restaurants and other businesses around Lake Tahoe.

“There are so many people supporting this communitywide movement,” director of SWEP Ashley Phillips said. “But students are smart, creative, and they problem-solve in ways adults don’t. They have powerful voices to use.”

At Sierra Nevada College on April 19, students from the Sierra Watershed Education Partnership (SWEP), SOS Outreach program, and Sierra Expeditionary Learning School (SELS) united with Incline Village General Improvement District, League to Save Lake Tahoe and UC Davis TERC in an event called The Last Straw. The goal was to create plastic-straw-awareness in Lake Tahoe. The event highlighted the student’s work in the community and featured a documentary film on the history of plastic straws.



Youngsters educate adults about plastic. Photo/Terra Breden

“We were all working on this single-use plastic awareness event in our communities and decided to combine forces. I love giving the kids the ability to showcase their work,” IVGID Resource Conservationist Madonna Dunbar told *Lake Tahoe News*.

The Lake Tahoe youths have done a lot of legwork to further their cause. Students from each of the programs formed coalitions to teach the community about the danger of single-use plastics, going to restaurants and businesses in South Lake Tahoe, Incline Village, Tahoe City, Kings Beach, and Truckee. They went to restaurants throughout the basin with proposal letters and created slogans and logos for their anti-straw campaign. Their goal was to persuade Lake Tahoe restaurants to stop using plastic straws, or at least make them available for guests upon request only.

“The kids did the work. They went out into the community and gave the presentations. They learned how to go from a concept to implementation and have touched all corners of the Lake Tahoe community,” Dunbar said.

Their movement has been a success. Over the past three months, SOS Outreach students have reached out to 45 restaurants in South Lake Tahoe and 12 restaurants in Kings Beach and Incline Village. The SOS Outreach students were inspired by the SWEP youths, who had already taken action by contacting 25 restaurants in Truckee and Tahoe City. Together, students from each of the programs have touched almost the entire Lake Tahoe community.

So far, due to their efforts, Northstar and Mountain Slice Café have agreed to go completely straw-free. Many other restaurants from around the lake have decided to make single-use plastic straws available to guests by request only.

Part of South Lake Tahoe’s Polystyrene ban that the City Council approved this year includes restaurants having to ask people if they want a straw – not having it be automatic.

When 4th- and 5th-graders from SELS heard about the other students’ campaign, they started their own Outlaw the Straw movement and gave a presentation at the Lodge at Tahoe Donner. The 9- to-11-year-olds’ next goal is to attend a Truckee community meeting and get a ban on single-use plastics made into law.

“We believe this is the next step for our eco-conscious town,” 10-year-old SELS student Ben Martin said. “Our blue planet is unique and special.”

The event last week was attended by about 100 people. The League to Save Lake Tahoe even provided reusable bamboo straws and water-bottles that were labeled with the logo Drink Tahoe Tap.

The film "The History of Straws" was shown and then students from each of the programs stood up and presented their work. At the end of the event, students asked if the audience would "agree to go straw free," and as attendees rose from their seats and joined the Outlaw the Straw movement it appeared as if every seat in the room was empty.

The communitywide anti-straw movement continues to grow and reach others. Take Care Tahoe has commissioned for stickers and artwork to be made with slogans like "Straws Don't Suck," and "Drink Like a Fish." Businesses that join the movement to ban straws will be publicized and given stickers to display in their windows that show they are a part of the effort to ban plastic straws in Lake Tahoe.

"Single-use plastics and not drinking bottled water is where this all started for us and it's growing," Dunbar told *Lake Tahoe News*. "Now we have the momentum and we have to keep that momentum going and capitalize on the gains we've made."