

Aluminium is infinitely recyclable. Why on earth are we still drinking from plastic bottles?

Maddyness speaks to Josh White about a future where water comes in cans and our oceans are plastic-free. The cofounder of CanO Water covers greenwashing in the food and drinks sector and the difficulty of changing consumer behaviour.

Josh White and his two mates-turned-cofounders had been yelling into the void for around three and a half years when *that* Blue Planet episode came out. Shocked into action by mounds of plastic they saw polluting a remote island on holiday, they'd come up with the seemingly obvious concept of 'water in a can'. While only 9% of plastic is successfully recycled, most of the aluminium in use today has been around since it was first mined in the 1800s.

It seemed like a no-brainer to them. But, of course, it seemed a lot more like a threat, or else a totally pointless exercise, to the people Josh and his friends needed to convince.

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And then along came David Attenborough and a billion Instagram photos of turtles choking on plastic straws. “The day after”, Josh tells me, “we must have got 300 calls and emails from every single company we’d contacted”.

“The general public, who previously didn’t understand what we were going on about – or didn’t understand how bad it was – sat in their living rooms, and watched a programme about how wildlife and sealife were suffering.” It was, Josh says, “a turning point” for CanO Water.

Fast forward to today and CanO Water is selling millions of units a year – and Josh is beginning to see his mission “to remove as much single-use plastic from the environment as possible” have a tangible impact.

I was apprehensive before speaking to Josh that putting water in a can was merely kicking the problem down the road, when realistically we should all be refilling reusable flasks – but the CanO Water team have clearly agonised over this. There will, Josh feels, always be demand for on the go water in supermarkets.

“Tap water is the greatest alternative but not everyone likes tap water; some people forget their reusable flask, and the reality is that we service that market. You don’t have to care about the environment, but you can easily just go over to a can because it looks good, feels good and allows you to do good for the environment.”

And until we invent something that dissolves totally, Josh says, the best way to package this water is with aluminium.

“The recycling rate of aluminium is incredible. You will very rarely hear of [recycling workers] moaning about it, because when they do the deep dive, they see the rates are so high that compared to every other type of packaging aluminium is by far the

best.”

“The greatest thing about cans is that they’re a commodity. You can make money from cans. There’s no incentive to pick up a plastic bottle.” Josh continues, “You’ll always get things slipping through. But if someone can make money from something, it’s more likely that they’re not going to miss it.”

At the moment, the average aluminium can recycling rate in Europe stands at around 75%. The campaign group Every Can Counts, who have a handy infographic on the exact processes behind metal recycling, are working towards improving this to 90% or more by 2030.

Improving the aluminium recycling rate is one – and probably the least urgent – of many issues standing in the way of a sustainable food and drinks sector. Purely on the topic of packaging, Josh is very clear that other drinks brands should be doing a lot more, and that there’s no way of ‘greening’ plastic.

“Greenwashing is rife at the moment. I see a lot of plastic bottle brands changing their messaging – it’s greenwashing. Plastic is plastic. A plastic bottle, in the best case scenario, would come back as another plastic bottle, which can only be recycled a few times.”

Dealing with the waste problem will require a lot more than billboards and platitudes. “I don’t want to sound doom and gloom,” Josh adds, “but I think that the government play *the biggest* part in [this battle]. The government has to put bans on things; they have to put taxes on things. It’s about pushing the prices of certain products up because they are actually ruining the planet and killing wildlife.”

Josh acknowledges that – despite the best of intentions when the trio started up – CanO Water too has a long way to go before it is 100% sustainable. “It’s

impossible to be perfect unless you're a multibillion dollar brand." Its water comes from Austria, because the team couldn't find anywhere in the UK to fill cans with water. Its cases come in plastic shrinkwrap, although this will – all being well – be changing to cardboard soon.

In the meantime, Josh is set on influencing consumer behaviour for the better. He reckons people in the UK are pretty clued up and has faith their choices are improving by the day, but at the same time understands that – without adequate action from the public and private sectors – “getting people to shift away from what they're used to is a very, very, very hard battle.”

Discover CanO Water

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