

Paper Cups Runneth Over

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By Melanie Lenart

As the coffee sloshed onto the coat in my arms to the beat of my steps, I regretted my decision to pick up my morning brew in the standard paper cup. It would be a small cup, I had rationalized, and I'd probably save 10 minutes by dropping in at Caffé Luce before going to my office, where I had left my travel mug.

Bad move. Juggling the paper cup, a free sample from Eat A Pita, and my red jacket, I opened the office door, then dropped my keys on the ground. As my knee complained about the lunge to retrieve them, I made a mental note that this wouldn't have happened with my own mug. It has a secure lid so I can throw it in my backpack, freeing my hands from the juggling act.

Easier transport is one reason to avoid the paper cups most coffee shops foist at you. But the biggest reason to bring your own mug – or insist on a ceramic cup if you're drinking in – comes down to protecting the environment.

The making of a disposable cup releases about a quarter pound of the greenhouse gas carbon dioxide, according to a joint study done by Starbucks, The Pew Charitable Trusts and Environmental Defense. And tossing out a cup a day creates about 125 pounds of garbage by the end of a year.

Because they touch our lips, paper cups are rarely made out of recycled material, so wood chips from trees goes into their production. And the process uses not only trees but also a lot of water – about 2.3 gallons per paper cup, even counting the washing of the ceramic mug – at least in this Starbucks' study, which found dishwashers often run half empty.

Basically, it only takes about 20 uses for the ceramic mug to pay off its production and transport footprint, leaving the potential for several thousand carbon-free uses. So consider gifting someone with a travel mug this holiday season – that is, if their concern for the environment exceeds their interest in blending into the crowd.

The latest reusable mug design suggests many coffee lovers are hooked on the disposable look. It's a replica of a paper cup. That fits, as I rarely see anyone else with their own mug at the dozen or so places I frequent in central Tucson.

Even when they're staying in to enjoy their brew, most people will accept paper cups without thinking twice. Baristas sometimes hand me a paper cup even when I order my coffee "in a mug for here." I've learned to look pointedly toward the mugs as I say it.

Not everyone is prepared to provide mugs for customers. My haunts with mugs on hand include Epic Café, the Cup, Raging Sage, Caffé Luce, Ike's and Espresso Art. Starbucks made it a policy to have mugs on hand after its 2000 study mentioned above, but I find it's good to enunciate "in a mug" at our local franchises. The same goes for Paradise Café. Time Market only recently started offering the option of getting a ceramic mug if you're staying, a nice change in policy after more than a decade of providing only disposable cups.

These little things add up. Using a paper cup a day for a year adds up to driving 110 miles in an average American car. I'm working on my driving habits, but at least it's easy to carry a travel mug. Now I just need to start carrying a spoon with me too, so I won't have to ponder what's worse for the environment, a wooden stirrer or a plastic spoon.

Author: Melanie Lenart is an environmental scientist and writer, and the author of the 2010 book Life in the Hothouse: How a Living Planet Survives Climate Change – which, for the record, is printed on 100 percent recycled paper.