World No Tobacco Day 2022; Tobacco: Threat to our Environment – One More Reason to Quit

“Every cigarette you smoke, you are literally burning resources where they are already scarce, burning resources where our very existence depends upon.”

Dr. Ruediger Krech, Director of Health Promotion, WHO.

The overall reduction in tobacco use as reported by Global Adult Tobacco Survey -2 India is a positive indicator for health and well-being of the population. It is a first milestone in long road ahead to a future where people are less likely to suffer from the consequences of a preventable cause of mortality and morbidity. Tobacco not only determinately affects the health of populations but also poses a considerable danger to our planet. Since the adoption of the World Health Organization (WHO) Framework Convention on Tobacco Control in 2003, parties to the treaty have focused on the negative impact of tobacco consumption on human health but recent reports on the environmental impacts of tobacco have opened a Pandora’s Box containing strikingly long-term impacts of tobacco from an environmental perspective. From cultivation to manufacturing, distribution, product use, and postconsumer waste, tobacco-related activities are a threat to the environment. Each of these stages has negative implications, which include hazardous health effects on cultivators, the use of limited resources such as water and healthy soil, the creation of pollutants through manufacturing, and climate change. A tobacco farmer, who plants, cultivates, and harvests may suffer from green tobacco sickness and can absorb as much nicotine as is found in 50 cigarettes. Tobacco plants also require intensive use of fertilizers because they absorb more nitrogen, phosphorus, and potassium than other major food crops, meaning tobacco depletes soil fertility more rapidly and makes it unsuitable for other crops. As described above, tobacco farming leads to soil degradation, which hinders the maintenance of biodiversity. In 2017, the WHO identified 13 countries across the globe where tobacco-driven habitat fragmentation and deforestation have led to significant loss of biodiversity. With the exception of the filter, the entire cigarette is fuel for the production of smoke. Approximately, 14 g of CO₂ is emitted per cigarette over its whole life cycle, along with methane, nitrous oxide in addition to other air pollutants. Discarded cigarettes also remain an important cause of accidental fires, wildfires, and fire deaths. In 2010, one cigarette butt ignited a major fire in India, which led to the burning of 60 ha of forest.

In addition, transporting a finished pack of cigarettes to its point of sale often involves extensive transport costs, usually through diesel-driven trucks, and according to a recent study, the particulate matter in environmental outdoor air pollution leads to accelerated buildup of calcium in arteries, which can increase the rate of arteriosclerosis by 10%–20% and consequently the risk of heart attacks and strokes. The WHO lists air pollution from transport in trucks as one of the primary causes of disease-related air pollution. The worldwide manufacturing of cigarettes stands estimated at 6 trillion, marketed in about 300 billion packages composed of paper, ink, cellophane, foil, and glue, producing waste of at least 2 million tons in 2021. The management of waste generated from packaging produces solid waste and results in additional pressure on landfill, as well as toxic chemical leakage into the environment from landfill. The WHO estimates that the costs of total litter (all product waste) for India is about USD 8 billion and of this 9.57% is estimate of the proportion of all litter that is tobacco product waste, which stands at USD 766 million in 2021.

The categorical reference of a Tobacco Reduction Target (3A) in the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) makes it obvious that it poses a consequential threat to sustainable global development. The SDGs show that health cannot be considered in isolation from a host of other factors, of which the environment is one. The environmental effects of tobacco turn tobacco from an issue of individual well-being to one of global well-being. It identifies tobacco as a serious problem for the entire planet and human development as a whole, not simply an individual health threat. Inconvenient but harsh reality is that we are focused on short-term goals at the expense of our planet, and it is humans who are going to suffer irrespective of nationality, race, culture, caste, creed, or gender. Creating awareness is perhaps the single most important action to undertake and ensure that development and growth are achieved without impoverishing the natural world because if nature is destroyed we too will be. Ultimately, every step made will move us closer to a world.
that recognizes tobacco as a serious problem for the entire planet. The human, financial, and environmental costs are simply too great for us to not act.

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