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Plastic Industry's Fake Tears

'Every Bottle Back' Is Industry's Latest Bid to Dodge Responsibility for Plastic Pollution

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From its [Super Bowl commercial](#) to podcast sponsorships, I've been dismayed to hear the beverage industry promoting its Every Bottle Back campaign, proclaiming diligent efforts to reduce the plastic pollution filling our oceans, landscapes and landfills. It reminds me of the infamous anti-litter advertisements I grew up watching.

In those [iconic Keep America Beautiful ads](#), an actor portraying a Native American wept over how Americans litter our beautiful countryside after stepping from his canoe. Facing pressure that new laws would limit disposable packaging, the ad shifted the narrative to people littering. And the beverage industry is still peddling the same deceptive advertising tactics to fool Americans and dodge corporate accountability.

When that ad came out in 1971, my dad worked in public relations for Owens-Illinois Glass Company, which formed the Keep America Beautiful organization with the American Can Co. in the '50s to discourage littering, which was increasing. By the '70s, as the environmental movement was starting to demand polluter responsibility, Coca-Cola and other beverage producers dumped tons of money into Keep America Beautiful to create the ads and run them regularly, all over the country.

It worked. What was [then called the Crying Indian](#) ad was one of the most effective ad campaigns in U.S. history. It even fooled much of the environmental movement, which initially supported an ad campaign designed to promote the idea that individuals are responsible for waste products, rather than the corporations that produced them.

Today's [Every Bottle Back](#) campaign by the American Beverage Association is just as insidious, focusing on plastic bottles and [perpetuating the myth](#) that they can be effectively recycled. Most [plastic can't be recycled](#) into new bottles, which is why they get incinerated, landfilled or littered — often after [ill-informed consumers](#) think they've recycled them. Just 8% of plastic used in the

United States gets recycled, often into clothing that continues to shed microplastics and plastic fibers.

My dad feels a bit bad about the role he played in launching this blame-shifting advertising effort. “It was pushing off responsibility onto the mass of individuals instead of an industry being responsible for its products,” he told me recently. “It was effective at the time, but we knew we were fighting a rearguard effort.”

In other words, after the first Earth Day in 1970, a rising environmental movement was demanding that polluters take responsibility for their waste. So the beverage and packaging industries teamed up to deliver a powerful message of individual responsibility.

“People start pollution. People can stop it,” was the tagline of those Keep America Beautiful ads, portraying a weeping Native American who was actually an Italian-American actor, compounding its deception.

But polluters start pollution, not the random litterbugs that those polluters spent so much money scapegoating. And today, as [plastics fill our oceans](#), there’s a growing popular demand to “make corporate polluters pay.” That’s one of eight executive actions [our huge national coalition](#) is asking President Biden to take as part of a [Presidential Plastics Action Plan](#).

Plastic pollution is a crisis in this country. It permeates everything and travels throughout the [food web](#) into [wildlife](#) and [humans](#). It comes from fossil fuels and contributes to climate change at every stage in its life cycle, from the fracked gas it comes from through its industrial processing to the emissions and chemicals it releases over the decades it takes to break down.

No amount of individual action, guilt or scapegoating can break that cycle. This is a systemic problem only the federal government can address, either through executive action or legislation like the [Break Free From Plastic Pollution Act](#).

We don’t need more fake tears or [false promises](#) from the plastics industry. It’s time to take real action on the plastic pollution crisis.