



Sara Davison, left, the executive director of the Friends of Georgica Pond Foundation, moderates a panel discussion on the state of our water, featuring, Dr. Christopher Gobler of Stony Brook University; Stuart Lowrie of the Nature Conservancy; Dorian Dale of Suffolk County; and Suffolk County Legislator Bridget Fleming. See more photos on page 31. Independent/Richard Lewin

Troubled Waters

Water Views panelists agree time for action is now

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The audience that filled the John Drew Theatre in East Hampton's Guild Hall June 2 for The Independent's Water Views Festival Sunday received both a wake-up call and a call to action from the speakers and panelists who took part.

Keynote speaker Cyrill Gutsch, whose environmental organization, Parley for the Oceans, has made the elimination of plastics its top priority, warned that the world's oceans are reaching the point of no return and marine life could be effectively killed off by mid-century if the world does not react to the growing threats facing them.

CNN's Don Lemon and Sara Davison, the executive director of the Friends of Georgica Pond Foundation, served as moderators.

Calling plastic, an estimated eight million tons of which is dumped in the oceans each year, a "design failure," Gutsch said it was time for the world to

give up the mantra of "reduce, reuse, recycle," because it assumes that plastics are inert materials and not toxic to all forms of life.

He called for designers, businesses, and consumers alike to adopt a new mantra, "A.I.R.," which stands for avoid plastic, intercept, and repurpose it, and redesign products that currently rely on plastic components.

Michael Ogden, an engineer and the founder of Natural Systems International, which designs water infrastructure projects around the world, looked at the issue on a more regional basis.

He described Long Island as an "extraordinary" place, not the least of which is because of its deep aquifer that provides a ready source of pure drinking water or its steady annual rainfalls, which help replenish it.

But he added that aquifer is threatened because many of the island's houses

rely on individual septic systems. "That's basically flushing their toilets into the groundwater," he said. "Out of sight, out of mind." That process releases everything from nitrates to antibiotics, polluting the aquifer as well as surface waters, he said.

Taking Small Steps

Ogden urged audience members to take small steps such as reducing water use, eliminating the use of toxic chemicals, and volunteering for things like beach cleanups, and becoming involved in civic issues on the local level.

"You are blessed," he said. "Take care of the garden."

Edwina von Gal, the founder of the Perfect Earth Project, which educates homeowners about ways to remove the toxins from their landscapes, does just that.

"What we ask people to do is to make a commitment, a commitment to your property that you will do no harm," she said. If you take that pledge seriously, that means you will stop using insecticides and other toxins that kill the good bugs with the bad, she said.

Von Gal said many people rely on chemical treatments because "they are afraid for some reason of the consequences." It hasn't helped, she said, that the landscape industry has for decades told them that an organic approach costs

more and doesn't work as well.

She noted that the American green lawn aesthetic goes back to the early post-World War II era when the United States had a surplus of chemicals that were diverted to creating cookie-cutter lawns "that had a kind of military precision that made everyone feel safe."

She urged people to plant native species, water deeply but seldomly, use mulching mowers to fertilize lawns, and save leaf matter for valuable compost.

"Make a commitment to do no harm, make a commitment to fill it with life," she said. "Let nature play."

Studying Solutions

Beth Rattner, executive director of the Biomimicry Institute, said humans could also ask nature to work for them by studying how it solves its own problems and borrowing from those solutions for their own projects.

Thus, she said, scientists have studied whale fins or the energy produced by schools of fish to help them design and place more efficient wind turbines. Others have studied how lobsters so quickly replace their shells, to help create more environmentally friendly concrete.

"Nature does what we want to do without using fossil fuels, polluting the planet, or mortgaging the future," she said.

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