The Condoms Among Us

USED PROPHYLACTICS PROVE TO BE A GREATER HAZARD THAN EXPECTED

by Lolly Merrell

There it is again, that slumped white casing, the reminder of somebody's time out here. I pass the same condom nearly every day on the dirt road where I go running. It has lasted three seasons so far, anchored in its cul-de-sac through winter downpours, only slightly crisped during the past summer's heat. Moss won't even grow on it. It's a mile marker for me, a land buoy, an urban cairn, the exact point where I turn around on my run.

I've run into a lot of discarded condoms in my life, mostly along back roads on walks or runs, frequently in public parks. When I was 9 years old, visiting my grandmother in Florida, I walked down to the banks of the Halifax River, which ran behind her house, and found a length of condom packages. Wrapped in foil like candy, I carefully opened each one. With help from my sister, we placed the rolled condoms along the shore, reservoir tips pointed to the sun, and let all 50 of them loose. An armada of condoms floated down the Halifax River toward the Atlantic. What a great afternoon. We saved one to show my mom, and she squirreled it away, offering only a "Huh?" by way of explanation. I guess they made it back home, washed up near some rubber-tree plantation on the coast of India.

I'm sure adolescent boys harboring trophy condoms in their wallets are happy that latex has such impressive longevity. Unfortunately, as my experience can attest, this doesn't bode well for the environment. And while discarded plastic is a common sight, as far as trash goes, no one is compelled to pick up and toss away a condom. In fact, it's almost government-sanctioned that you don't. Karen Lefkovitz, an artist who wanted to display a collection of used condoms she had collected throughout her neighborhood, had to apply for OSHA approval to collect a biohazard under her NEA grant. She eventually lost her funding. In Canada they'll get you on the front end: A recent bill proposed to fine and arrest people for "the disposal of dangerous things in certain places," which included condoms, among other pointier objects. We even see the evidence from the discreet, those who flush in the privacy of their own bathrooms. Because of their slippery size, condoms slip through screens in wastewater treatment plants, and end up floating around holding tanks. More often than not, a parade of sundry sizes, shapes and textures make it to treated-sewage dumping sites in rivers and creeks.

There's certain to be more. Condoms in the AIDS age are sex gear *de rigueur*, which has in turn, contributed to increased demand for latex and rubber. As industry regulation for condom testing has become tougher, so have the condoms, lasting for years in their packages (and even longer on muddy Northwest back roads). The 2000 condom is virtually bulletproof but only disposable. In the old days, however, this wasn't the case. Condoms were reusable, recyclable, usually made from biodegradable material. Tortoise shells were used in Japan (imagine that...), linen sheaths, leather sheaths, and finally sheep gut, which was quite popular during the days of Casanova. To produce this particular condom, the sheep's intestine was rinsed, turned inside out, boiled, bleached and dried, then snipped off at just the desired length and tied shut at one end with a string. They were reusable, but pricey. Finally, at the turn of the century, vulcanized rubber ushered in a new, less expensive condom, a little thick, with a heavy seam, but it did the trick for soldiers in high-syphilis regions.

By the 1930s latex was discovered to have amazing strengths at very thin layers, making condoms more popular and easily produced. With this shift in product material, the rubber plantation industry boomed around the world. A plant that grows best in tropical climes, farmer and plantation owners discovered that plantations grew best in cleared virgin jungle. The rubber trees reach their prime "tapping" age around 25, then are deemed worthless shortly thereafter, at around 28. For years, and still today, farmers clear the land, now nutrient-poor, by burning the trees. The effect to the ecosystem is devastating, leaving patches of black jungle, a thick smog, and a poor humanitarian labor record to boot.

Today, condoms are so thin that 13,000 tons of rubber can produce as many as 8.5 billion condoms. Even with the rubber demand for latex condoms plateauing, rubber-tree plantations continue to spread throughout Brazil, Malaysia, Thailand, Africa and Southern India. Thankfully, the more progressive farmers are no longer burning but using their expired trees for timber, selling to a growing market for high-end rubberwood furniture. (Just think, your next imported armoire could have produced those Trojans in your medicine cabinet. Better yet, some farmers are relying on new clones of rubberwood species to prevent clearing new swaths of jungle.

So things are slowly getting better at the plantations, but what about the proliferation of the sidewalk condom The Preventor condom company claims their products are "Biodegradable" because they're made of natural ingredients.

I suppose everything breaks down eventually. And the reason that condoms seem to be in such abundance out of doors?

Well, that's natural. ■

In the old days, condoms were reusable, recyclable, usually made from biodegradable material. Tortoise shells were used in Japan (imagine that).