

Lubed up: dilemmas of a white European in Algarve during summer

Glazing morning rays peek through your blinds 15 minutes after you decided its not time for you to start your day yet. Inevitably, the light reaches your face anyway, forcing you out of your peaceful second slumber. 37 minutes, 3 coffees and 20 minutes of your daily combination of spotify and restless social media push notifications later you decided you've woken up. Its a Sunday so let's be honest, regardless the fact that you are facing a never-ending workload as a final year master student, you just pretend you've got nothing to do at all. The sunshine invites you, and another 50 minutes later you are beach-ready. One of the things that you surely bring along is your sunscreen. How would you survive without it? Your northern European genes ensured you would turn into a lobster within 5 seconds if you didn't lube up from the start. But is this a good thing though?

Have you ever thought about the plausible effect of the sunscreen you use on the marine environment? You know sunscreen contains some chemicals that function as ultraviolet shields by either the reflection or absorbance of UV radiation. And you are also aware of the widespread use of sunscreen among tourists, surfers, sailors, ... People who come in direct contact with the ocean at the shorelines. The environmental impact of your sunscreen after a dive in the sea is of no importance. Nonetheless, there are about 7,62 billion people living on this planet. In 2005, 23% of the world population was reported to live in a 'near coastal zone', a coastal area within 100m elevation and 100km of the coast (Crossland et al., 2005). That would be around 1.75 billion people in 2018. If all these people use sunscreen containing polluting compounds when swimming in coastal waters, the accumulated effects can be of mayor importance to the environment. Especially in areas like the Algarve, famous for their beautiful coastlines and good waves.

So, then what are we supposed to do? Are there any ecosystem friendly alternatives? There are differently composed sunscreens ranging from the benzophenone possessing ones to the ones mostly containing zinc oxide and titanium dioxide. But both of them have their own specific plausible impacts. No matter how toxic a certain type of sunscreen is reported to be, we cannot simply neglect the fact that it is a necessary product. People need it to protect their skin from becoming as red as the flags of the resistance. It's a product already fully implemented in today's market, produced and distributed on a large scale. One approach could be to ban the use of products containing threatening ingredients in the areas that are more susceptible to exposure. This would imply banning the use of sunscreen in for example coral reef areas, or touristic areas harbouring a high fish diversity. A second approach would be focussing on raising public awareness concerning the environmental impact of sunscreen. Increased awareness gives people a reason to reduce their usage. In the end it all comes down to the fact that the consumer should have access to unbiased scientific evidence regarding the matter. People that are informed in a nonpolar and correct way will mostly be able to keep in mind what they are actually doing. Knowledge can be implemented in the decisions you make, saving the future life of our beloved oceans.

So I guess for now, as long as you know what you're doing, you're allowed to lube up.