

## How our glittering oceans became plastic soup

Our oceans are blighted with plastic waste. Globally, we're creating over 300 million tonnes of plastic every year, as it is a cheap and adaptable form of packaging. But its ease of use is coming at a cost we cannot afford to pay any longer - our seas and our sea life are being poisoned by plastic. In 2015, 322 million tonnes of plastic, enough to weigh the same as 900 Empire State Buildings, was produced.

Waste management specialists Reconomy take a look into the sad story of our plastic soup.

## Overusing plastic

Plastic has become part of our everyday lives. Nevertheless, it has been estimated that around 50% of the plastic that we use is only used once and then disposed of. Only 12% of plastic is recycled, ranging from plastic bags to plastic bottles. When we looked to see where the greatest amount of plastic is being used, not surprisingly it came to packaging which accounted for 40% of its use.

Around 500 billion plastic bags are used every year around the world. However, the UK government has taken a step in the right direction by making large shops (those with over 250 employees) in England charge 5p for carrier bags. But has this helped? Since the scheme was introduced in 2015, England saw that the number of plastic bags used went down by 80% which has benefitted this environmental issue. Currently there is around 5.25 trillion pieces of plastic currently in our waters.

## Underneath the waves

According to Dame Ellen MacArthur, by 2050 the amount of plastic in the sea will outweigh the amount of fish. Not only does this have a threat on the existing sea creatures, such as turtles (at least 50% have consumed plastic), it also will have a huge impact on their habitats which could cause great damage to different environments below the water and create everlasting problems.

But it's been revealed that over 8 million tonnes of plastic is thrown into the oceans each year. This unacceptable amount of plastic causes 1 in 3 marine mammals to become entangled in the slurry of plastic. It's also been found that 90% of seabirds have pieces of plastic wedged into their stomachs — a problem caused by those on land affecting those off land.

Offsite locations and ships contribute around 20% of the ocean's litter problem, with the rest delivered by strong winds carrying rubbish to the waters, and little discarded on beaches. Sometimes, illegal dumping occurs and contributes to the issue. Research shows that plastic usually gathers where the ocean currents meet, forming plastic islands that sea creatures sometimes use as transportation that could move them far away from their usual habitat.

Plastic also absorbs toxins in the air, as well as containing its own chemical makeup. This impacts not only the sea creatures but carries on through the food chain to humans. After a while, the plastic in the sea will release chemicals and the fish in the ocean will potentially inhale them — resulting in a contaminated food supply chain.

## Combating the plastic soup

There are different ways you can help save our seas depending on how much plastic you currently use. If you're a business, the most common and effective way to reduce plastic pollution is to have a waste management service in place that can help you reduce and track the changes your business makes when it comes to waste. However, there are more methods that the everyday person can follow to make a difference:

- Prevention – ask yourself If you really need to use plastic, or if there’s a non-plastic alternative. Think reusable coffee cups instead of disposable cups that have plastic inner layers, or reusable glass water bottles instead of single-use plastic bottles.
- Recycling—sometimes the simplest solution is the best. If you recycle, you are immediately keeping plastics from entering our oceans and reducing the amount of new plastic that goes into circulation.
- Microbeads—this is becoming a more common type of plastic pollution in our ocean, and it’s preventable. Although the UK has banned microbeads in wash-off cosmetics like toothpaste and face scrubs, they are still contained in leave-on cosmetics and make-up. Such products contain tiny plastic particles and they make their way into the ocean through sewer systems.
- Litter picking—find out if your local beach is doing a litter picking event and help keep your community clean and looking leagues better. After all, we’re the ones who have to live here!