

# Plastic Pollution of the Oceans has Reached Crisis Point

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by Laura Briggs

An estimated 12 million tonnes of plastic flows into our oceans each year so no wonder we're facing one of the biggest litter crises our planet has ever seen.

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Strewn across beaches, floating on the surface of the water, hitting the sea bed and causing immeasurable damage to our marine life, the problem of plastic is one that needs our immediate attention and action. In fact the problem is now so bad, scientists predict that by 2050 there will be more plastic in the ocean than fish.

Bristol-based research organisation Eunomia, focuses on the sources and impacts of waste in the marine environment and is one of the leading UK organisations in this area. It recently published a report entitled Measures to Prevent Marine Plastics which concluded "there is no time to waste" in tackling the problem.

Monitoring and ongoing research is problematic due to the fact that sea plastic (and other litter) doesn't respect boundaries, and as such, a collective global approach is needed to combat the issue.

[ Recently ] a network of more than 100 NGOs set out a vision with 10 principles working towards the ultimate goal of a future free from plastic pollution. This represents the first step in a global movement to change society's perception and use of plastics.

Delphine Lévi Alvarès, Zero Waste Europe policy officer and coordinator of the European plastics alignment process says: "This is the first time that groups from all around the world have come together to find a common solution to the problem of plastic pollution. It is the beginning of a movement which will lead to governments, cities and companies taking major action to tackle this ever-growing problem.

" The NGOs involved are calling on the European Commission and Member States to strive for ambitious policy changes to lead the way to a future free from plastic pollution.

The prospect of banning "primary microplastics", or microbeads in cosmetics, became headline news recently, but secondary microplastics – where plastics have broken down from larger segments, remains as big, albeit a much less well understood, problem.

Many would argue plastics as a whole should be banned altogether, but Eunomia takes the view that turning our back on all plastic is unlikely to appeal and instead the organization suggests a number of measures including:

- A deposit-return scheme for single-use beverage containers
- The phasing out of plastic cotton bud sticks, (which can readily be replaced with paper-based alternatives)
- A comprehensive ban on microbeads in cosmetics products that could subsequently be extended to other products that are sources of marine microplastics

- The phasing out of plastic drinking straws and stirrers

Cyrill Gutsch, founder of New-York based Parley for the Oceans, has come up with another way of helping the clear up – by championing eco-innovation, and challenging brands to understand where their products come from at every point in the supply chain.

Using ocean plastics in products for fashion and sports industries is one part of this. Parley's solution is ultimately to re-invent plastic, and in the short-term follow the rules: to avoid plastic wherever you can, intercept plastic and pollution and redesign the source of the problem.

Working with Adidas ( sportswear manufacturer ), Parley has helped create a new trainer, which is made from sea plastics, and the company has teamed up with the UN to work with small island states including the Maldives, Grenada and the Seychelles.

Speaking about his collaboration with Adidas, Cyrill says: "Brands shouldn't just assemble their product. They should make the product and understand every little ingredient in it. You can only tweak the supply chain if you understand your product to the core."

Other brands tackling the plastic problem head on include US-based Hamilton Perkins, which creates bags from thousands of recycled plastic bottles, collected in developing countries. Founder Hamilton Perkins, says: My company turns recycled plastic bottles into designer bags. We also do a lot to track the impact, submitting to rigorous third party review. I do indirectly depend on the research and insights that marine scientists bring." In his promotional video he adds: "We don't just want to be a bag manufacturer, we want to be a problem-solver, and when we see our bags around the world we know that we're solving problems around the world."

Belgium-based Ecover also uses recycled plastics in their

products, using 75% Plantplastic, and 25% post-consumer recycled plastic. As consumers we all need to become more aware of what goes into the products we buy, and to ensure our waste doesn't end up in the seas, but responsibility also lies with corporations and producers to understand how products are made and the impact they have. Through further research and a collective determined to rid the world of plastic pollution, perhaps we still have a chance to save our oceans.

**Laura Briggs is a UK-based news reporter for The Ecologist**