



Plastic is versatile and long-lasting. Many everyday items use plastic, from our toothpaste tubes to our phone covers. But the very qualities that make plastic so useful also make it a huge problem. Cheap and disposable, many plastic items, like drink bottles, are used once and then thrown away. Much of this plastic ends up in our ecosystems with damaging effects. Greenpeace is working hard to tackle worldwide plastic issues.

Why does plastic pollution matter?

Plastic pollution is ugly to look at. But that's the least of our problems.

It worsens climate change

Plastic is made mostly from fossil fuels, like oil, coal and gas. Plastic creates dangerous gases that contribute to climate change at every stage of its life – from extraction to disposal. At the moment, around 6% of fossil fuel extraction goes into making plastic, but industry predicts this will rise to around 20% by 2050. Climate change is having disastrous consequences on our planet, from rising sea levels to more frequent heat waves. To find out more, read the 'Climate Emergency' introduction sheet.

It harms animals and wildlife

Animals can become tangled in plastic waste, injuring or killing them. Plastics and microplastics can accidentally be eaten by animals. For example, a sperm whale found dead off the coast of Scotland last year had a 100kg 'litter ball' in its stomach. Fishing nets, ropes, bags, plastic cups and gloves were just some of the items that were found in its stomach. Microplastics contain harmful chemicals which can be poisonous to wildlife. These chemicals will enter the food chain, affecting lots more animals.

It damages humans

The UK ships lots of its plastic waste to other countries, so we just pass the problem elsewhere. For example, Malaysia imported a lot of our waste up until early 2019. A recent Greenpeace investigation showed that much of this plastic ended up in dumps, leaking toxic chemicals into the environment. Even the plastic that had been burned left behind a toxic residue. Worse still, burning large quantities of waste causes respiratory problems and headaches for local residents.



What's the problem?



Plastic is everywhere

Plastic takes a very long time to break down. As it gets smaller, it becomes tiny particles called microplastics. Even clothes made from artificial materials, like polyester and nylon, shed microplastic fibres when they're washed. Microbeads, another type of microplastic, are sometimes added to products such as cosmetics and household cleaners. Microplastics end up in everything; our rivers, our oceans and in the stomachs of many animals.



The recycling myth

You might think recycling is the solution. However, only 9% of all plastic produced worldwide has been recycled and plastic can only be recycled a few times: this is usually between 3-8 times.

The rest of our plastic rubbish is incinerated (burned), releasing greenhouse gases, or goes into massive dumping sites called landfill. A lot of plastic gets into our streams, rivers and eventually oceans, where it can travel around the world on ocean currents. In the middle of the Pacific Ocean, there is an area called the Great Pacific Garbage Patch. It's the largest accumulation of plastic in the world and is three times the size of France. We need to 'turn the tap off' and stop producing plastic.



Plastic production is increasing

From the 1950s to the 70s, only a small amount of plastic was produced. However, by the 1990s, this amount had more than tripled. The amount of plastic being produced is continuing to grow. In 2020, The Everyday Plastic Survey found an average of 141 items of plastic are thrown away by a UK household in a week. This is a lot of plastic across the entire country.



Microplastic

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What's the solution?

The simple answer is to make and use less plastic. Here's how:



Deposit Return Schemes

Greenpeace is persuading the government to introduce a Deposit Return Scheme (DRS) for plastic bottles. Scotland agreed to one starting in 2022, but we're still urging the government to have one in England, Wales and Northern Ireland. A DRS is when you borrow a bottle by paying a small deposit instead of buying it. When you've finished your drink, you take the bottle back to a shop and put it into a machine. The machine sorts the plastic and then you get the deposit back. Currently, UK households are failing to recycle as many as 16 million plastic bottles everyday. A DRS would see this number reduced significantly. In Norway, 96% of all plastic bottles are returned and made into new bottles.



Reducing supermarket plastic

So much of the food we buy comes in pointless packaging and supermarkets have a big role to play in reducing plastic pollution. In fact, we found that ten of the UK's biggest supermarkets are producing over 900,000 tonnes of single-use plastic packaging every year! We exposed these findings to the public and made [a league table](#) ranking supermarkets according to their plastic production and reduction plans. This information helped to raise awareness of the issue and lots of people joined Greenpeace in asking supermarkets to change.



Company commitments

Greenpeace research uncovered that Coca-Cola produces over 3,400 throwaway plastic bottles every second. Worldwide, Greenpeace supporters have been challenging the company. Over 90,000 emails were sent to the company's European head office asking them to do more to reduce their plastic footprint. Supporters also phoned them and exposed the impact Coca-Cola was having on their local beaches and waterways. Coca Cola has begun to introduce more reusable drinks bottles in Latin America. However, it still has a long way to go globally.



Researching the effects of plastic

In early 2019, Greenpeace surveyed 13 rivers in the UK. We found plastic in every river we tested! The River Mersey in the North West of England was the most polluted, with proportionally more plastic than the Great Pacific Garbage Patch. We used this information to continue urging the UK government to set legally-binding plastic reduction targets in the Environment Bill.

What can you do?

All of us can try to use less plastic in our lives. Here are three simple ways you can do this.



1



2



3



Simple changes

Whilst shopping, ask yourself and your family: 'Can I buy that item with less plastic packing? Does this bunch of bananas need to be in a plastic bag? Could I put my apples straight into my basket?' You can also do the following:

- Use a reusable bag instead of a disposable one.
- Carry a refillable water bottle.
- Avoid foods wrapped in lots of plastic.
- Ditch plastic cutlery, plates, bowls and cups for reusable ones.
- Say no to plastic straws if you don't need them.

Challenge your school

Do you think your school could do more to reduce their plastic use? Why don't you help them! Talk to your teacher about changes you want to see in school or invite a Greenpeace Speaker to come and talk about how you can reduce plastic.

Invite a Greenpeace Speaker

Ask an adult to invite a Greenpeace Speaker to talk to your class or club. They'll share their knowledge of the challenges our planet faces and ways you can help. Find out more: act.gp/speakers

Reduce your plastic

How much plastic waste do you produce a week? Count and categorise your households plastic waste. For example, how much food packaging do you use? Then find ways to reduce what you use.

Share your knowledge

Why not have a zero waste party with your family and friends? [Here's how](#). It's a fun way to show that life without plastic can be fantastic! Remember to talk to them about why it's good to reduce our plastic waste.