

What a Dump!

How do we get rid of so much plastic trash?

The Plastic Predicament

Try to get through a day without using plastic. For that matter, try to go just one hour without it. From food and drink packages to cell phones and toothbrushes, plastic is nearly impossible to avoid. You can't even turn on a light without flicking a plastic switch.



Oene Moedt/Foto Natura/Minden Pictures

A seagull is entangled in plastic six-pack ring.

Plastic doesn't exist in nature. It's created from chemicals. Mass production of plastic started in the 1940s. Since then, it has become supremely popular-and for good reason. Plastic is lightweight, cheap, and convenient. It also lasts for a very long time. That can be good-you don't want your laptop to fall apart as you type-but it can be bad too.

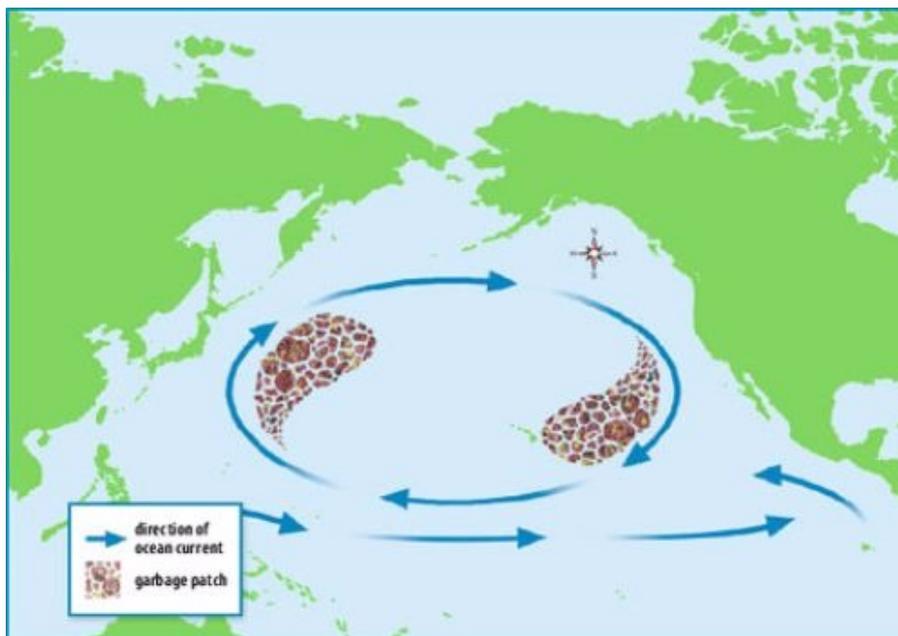
Plastic can remain in the environment for hundreds or even thousands of years. It piles up, filling garbage dumps and polluting the land and the ocean. Each year, more than 300 million tons of new plastic are manufactured worldwide. Clearly, we have a plastic problem.

Trash Soup

Natural products such as food, paper, and wood are **biodegradable** [bigh-oh-di-GRAY-duh-buhl]; they're broken down by bacteria and are absorbed by the environment. Plastic, on the other hand, is photodegradable. Light from the sun causes it to break into smaller pieces over time. It never degrades completely, however. It often winds up littering the land and the ocean.

In the Pacific Ocean, plastic waste has collected in a swirling "soup" of trash called the Great Pacific Garbage Patch. It's huge-four times as big as Texas! It's just one example of an ocean garbage patch. Plastic pollutes all the world's seas. The United Nations Environment Programme estimates that plastic kills 100,000 marine mammals and turtles and 1 million seabirds every year. Some become tangled in plastic debris, while others die after eating plastic trash that they can't digest. Scientists estimate that 80 percent of the ocean's plastic started out on land.

Now the good news: you can help by tossing plastic into the recycling bin instead of the trash. A measly 28 percent of plastic bottles were recycled in 2009, according to the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency. You can help drive that number up.



Leigh Haeger

Sea of Trash

The Great Pacific Garbage Patch is two areas of floating garbage in the Pacific Ocean. Each one is twice the size of the state of Texas. They lie within the North Pacific Subtropical Gyre, a ring of currents that turns clockwise in the ocean.

Reduce, Reuse

Still, recycling won't solve our plastic predicament by itself. Not all types of plastic can be recycled. And those that can may not be recycled in the way you'd expect. Plastic water and soft-drink bottles—some of the most commonly used plastics in the United States—are hardly ever turned into new bottles. Instead, they're recycled into carpet, furniture, and fleece clothing. When those products wear out, they often can't be recycled a second time.

So what can you do? One of the best ways to tackle the problem is to reduce the amount of plastic you use. Carry reusable water containers instead of single-use plastic bottles. Bring your lunch in recyclable aluminum foil instead of a plastic sandwich bag. Ask your family to carry reusable tote bags to the grocery store. Every little bit helps.

Plastic will probably always be part of our lives. But by making smart choices, we can keep it from burying us.