

Plastic Pollution Affects Sea Life Throughout the Ocean

Photos document extent of the impact, which extends to the seafood people eat

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Our ocean and the array of species that call it home are succumbing to the poison of plastic. Examples abound, from the gray whale that died after stranding near Seattle in 2010 with [more than 20 plastic bags](#), a golf ball, and other rubbish in its stomach to the harbor seal pup [found dead](#) on the Scottish island of Skye, its intestines fouled by a small piece of plastic wrapper.

According to the United Nations, at least [800 species](#) worldwide are affected by marine debris, and as much as 80 percent of that litter is plastic. It is estimated that up to 13 million metric tons of plastic ends up in the ocean each year—the equivalent of a rubbish or garbage truck load's worth every minute. Fish, seabirds, sea turtles, and marine mammals can become entangled in or ingest plastic debris, causing suffocation, starvation, and drowning. Humans are not immune to this threat: While plastics are estimated to take up to hundreds of years to fully decompose, some of them break down much quicker into tiny particles, which in turn end up in the [seafood we eat](#).

The following photos help illustrate the extent of the ocean plastics problem.



A sea turtle found in the Pacific Ocean had this debris in its stomach, according to The Ocean Cleanup, a foundation.

The Ocean Cleanup Foundation

Research indicates that half of sea turtles worldwide have ingested plastic. Some starve after doing so, mistakenly believing they have eaten enough because their stomachs are full. On many beaches, plastic pollution is so pervasive that it's affecting turtles' reproduction rates by altering the temperatures of the sand where incubation occurs.

A recent [study](#) found that sea turtles that ingest just 14 pieces of plastic have an increased risk of death. The young are especially at risk because they are not as selective as their elders about what they eat and tend to drift with currents, just as plastic does.



A dead albatross chick found on Midway Atoll in the Pacific Ocean with plastic debris in its stomach.

U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service

Plastic waste kills up to a million seabirds a year. As with sea turtles, when seabirds ingest plastic, it takes up room in their stomachs, sometimes causing starvation. Many seabirds are found dead with their stomachs full of this waste. Scientists estimate that 60 percent of all seabird species have eaten pieces of plastic, a figure they predict will rise to 99 percent by 2050.



A dolphin with a plastic bag trailing from its fin swims in the Fernando de Noronha Archipelago in Brazil.

João Vianna

While dolphins are highly intelligent and thus unlikely to eat plastic, they are susceptible to contamination through prey that have ingested synthetic compounds.

Plastic in our oceans affects creatures large and small. From seabirds, whales, and dolphins, to tiny seahorses that live in coral reefs.....



A seahorse wraps its tail around a plastic cotton swab near Sumbawa Island, Indonesia.

Courtesy of Justin Hofman

... and schools of fish that reside on those same reefs and nearby mangroves.



A plastic band restricts the growth of a blue-striped grunt fish in the Caribbean Sea.

Karen Doody/Stocktrek Images

Plastic waste can encourage the growth of pathogens in the ocean. According to a [recent study](#), scientists concluded that corals that come into contact with plastic have an 89 percent chance of contracting disease, compared with a 4 percent likelihood for corals that do not.

Unless action is taken soon to address this urgent problem, scientists predict that the weight of ocean plastics will exceed the combined weight of all of the fish in the seas by 2050.

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