

## Plastic debris – a deadly threat for marine animals

Plastic has become almost indispensable in our daily life. However, when it is improperly disposed of and ends up in the oceans, plastic debris poses a serious threat to various marine species. Plastic persists in the environment and is not readily degraded. Thus, plastic can continue to threaten marine life over several decades.

For many marine species, drifting shopping bags and other plastic items resemble their natural food. This is why marine animals, in particular sea turtles and sea birds, frequently ingest plastic debris. This indigestible “food” blocks the intestinal tract and leads to death through malnutrition and starvation. The animals thus die an agonising death.

Ingested plastic debris may also poison marine animals as harmful substances contained in plastic may leach out and be absorbed by the animal’s body. Moreover, harmful chemicals in the environment may attach themselves to plastic debris. Therefore, the ingestion of very tiny plastic particles – either plastic pellets or broken up fragments of larger plastic items – can also be a source of hazardous substances accumulating in the marine food chain. Eventually, these chemicals wind up on our plates too.

### Garbage dumps drifting in the oceans

Today, plastic debris is one of the main sources of global ocean pollution. And it is not restricted to areas where people live. Far out in the open sea, waste is concentrating in ocean currents. Hundreds of thousands of mainly small plastic pieces per square kilometre circulate on vast areas. Like the large oceans, the Mediterranean, too, shows high densities of plastic waste.

### Main source: single-use plastic from land

About 20 percent of the 8.8 million tons of plastic that end up in the oceans every year originate from ships. Fishing gear, like old fishing nets and lines, that are dumped in the oceans become deadly traps for whales and other marine wildlife. However, 80 percent of marine plastic pollution originates on land. Wind, floodwaters and rivers carry discarded waste into the sea even from locations far from the coastline.

### Most prevalent plastic debris items in the oceans are:

- Shopping bags
- Bottles, caps and cups
- Packaging material
- Cigarette butts
- Fishing gear (fishing lines, nets, etc.)



Marine animals starve to death – with their stomachs full of plastic.

PLASTIC POLLUTION



Packaging bands and straps around the head or fins of adolescent animals lead to painful wounds and even to death.



Every year 1 million sea birds and an innumerable number of other marine animals such as whales, dolphins, seals and sea turtles are killed by plastic debris.



## Our actions against marine plastic pollution:

### Reduction of plastic debris that ends up in the oceans

- We support international environmental education projects which raise the awareness of significant problems surrounding marine debris.
- We promote the use of reusable bags for fruit and vegetables. They are lightweight and can each replace up to 1,000 single-use plastic bags. Available at: [shop.oceancare.org](http://shop.oceancare.org)

### Removal of plastic debris from the oceans

- We support experts who conduct relevant research on plastic pollution.
- We promote initiatives that remove plastic waste from beaches and at sea.

### Rescue of entangled animals

- We participate in international whale conservation committees where we further the quick implementation of concrete measures in order to protect marine animals from plastic debris.
- Our research teams rescue animals that become entangled in plastic debris, fishing lines or nets, and thus we have direct involvement in saving the lives of marine animals.



## What you can do:

- When shopping use only reusable bags.
- Whenever possible avoid disposable plastic and buying any food wrapped in plastic.
- Always dispose of any waste properly.
- Collect any dumped plastic items you may come across on land or at sea and dispose of them properly.
- Support our endeavours to eliminate marine plastic pollution by making a donation.

**Thank you for helping us to disburden the environment of plastic debris and thus to protect marine life.**

Images: OceanCare, Shutterstock, Georgia Department of Natural Resources, David Johnson.

This young bottlenose dolphin was lucky. He was freed of the plastic packaging strap that would otherwise have killed him slowly.



## OceanCare

Dolphins and other marine animals are increasingly threatened. Numerous species are on the brink of extinction. OceanCare has been working for the protection of marine mammals and the oceans since 1989. With research and conservation projects and campaigns, its Special Consultative Status with the Economic and Social Council of the United Nations, as well as partner of the UNEP Global Partnership on Marine Litter, OceanCare has contributed on a number of levels to a range of important environmental committees. OceanCare has gained international public attention and respect and, in so doing, is helping to protect marine life. [www.oceancare.org](http://www.oceancare.org)

