

# WHAT A WASTE: THE TRUTH ABOUT PLASTICS POLLUTION

KITE & KEY  
MEDIA

## [VIDEO TRANSCRIPT]

So, you've probably heard that America has a problem with plastic. You know what? Scratch that. We have *multiple* problems with plastic.



But the one that most directly affects you involves the kinds of products you use every day—things like straws, water bottles, or shopping bags.

Up until a few years ago, it didn't seem like a very big deal. And then, suddenly...everything changed.

So what happened? Why did we all suddenly start worrying about something we had taken for granted for decades?

While we've known for a long time that there's a problem with plastic waste winding up in the ocean, the tipping point came with a viral video that showed a sea turtle...

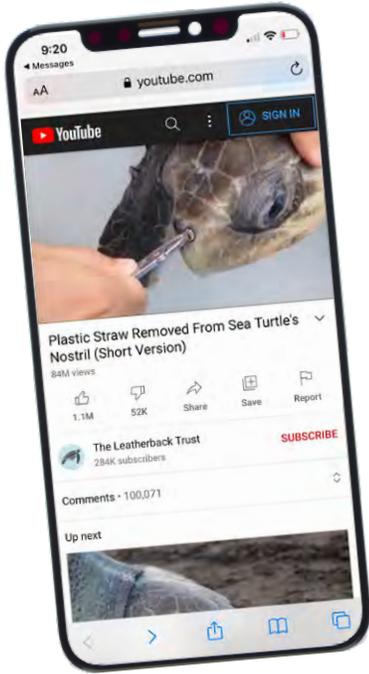
having a plastic straw removed from its nose...with pliers.

And...it's just as terrible as it sounds.



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Now, when people saw that video, they wanted to take action, and rightly so—because, when it comes to creatures that the human brain can't bear to see in agony, turtles are right up there with puppies and Betty White. You watch this video, and you'd do anything to make the suffering of that innocent creature stop.



Ironically, the development of consumer plastics actually played a role in saving turtles too. Scientists estimate that over 9 million hawksbill sea turtles were killed by humans for their shells. One of the reasons the practice declined? The development of cellulose acetate, the plastic that is used to create modern tortoiseshell designs.

There's good reason to be upset. About 11 million metric tons of plastic end up in the world's oceans each year.<sup>1</sup>

And it's estimated to have negative effects on over 800 different species.<sup>2</sup> So it didn't seem unreasonable when people started making the argument that if Americans want less plastic in the ocean, they need to start banning plastic on land.



Where has this happened in the US? Eight states currently ban single-use plastic bags: California, Connecticut, Delaware, Hawaii, Maine, New York, Oregon, and Vermont. New Jersey will prohibit them beginning in 2022. While no state has imposed an outright ban on plastic straws, states such as California, Oregon, and Vermont prohibit their use unless specifically requested by a customer. Some cities have enacted plastic straw bans, however, and many vendors have voluntarily stopped providing them.

But, see, this is where we've got to be careful. Because "doesn't seem unreasonable" isn't the same thing as "is actually true."

There's a lot of misunderstanding about plastics, partially because in the initial rush to make things better, some of the sources we relied on to explain these things were a little...imprecise.

For instance, when the bans were first proposed, we were told that Americans use 500 million plastic straws a day—which is pretty remarkable for a country of 330 million people.

So where did that number come from? Well, from the National Park Service—and they obviously know what they're talking about... except they got it from a recycling company, which probably knows what it's talking about? Except the recycling company got it [deep sigh]...**OK, they got it from a nine-year-old boy...who called some straw companies.**<sup>3</sup>



So what's the real number of straws Americans use every day? No one really knows, but it's definitely less than 500 million. Estimates by a pair of market research firms place the number somewhere between 170 million and 390 million.

So how many straws do we use every year? Here's the surprising answer: it doesn't matter. Because here's what we got wrong: **The problem isn't plastic waste itself—it's how it's disposed of.**

You may have heard that the United States produces more plastic waste than any country in the world except China, and that's true.<sup>4</sup> But there's a more important statistic there. **Nearly 75% of China's plastic waste is mismanaged, meaning it's so poorly secured that it may end up in the ocean.** The percentage in the U.S.? Less than 1%.<sup>5</sup>

What does it mean for waste to be "poorly secured"? Usually it means that trash is dumped in or near a waterway, allowing it to eventually drift out in the open ocean.



America might be one of the world's leaders in generating plastic waste, but we're also one of the world's leaders in not treating the planet like our dorm room.

[Don't get too full of yourself. Your grandparents defeated the Nazis. You just successfully threw away some Funyuns.]

The real problem when it comes to plastics pollution is quite literally half a world away. Over 80% of the plastic waste in the ocean comes from Asia, where improperly disposed trash is often dumped into rivers that allow it to drift out to the ocean. In fact, **nearly half of the plastic in our oceans comes from just two countries—the Philippines and India.**<sup>6</sup>

We could ban **all** plastics in the U.S.—not just bags and straws, but everything from Legos to traffic cones—and barely make a difference.

In addition to pollution that drifts into the ocean from land-based sources, there is also a serious problem with waste that is dumped directly from marine vessels. Research suggests that this trash comes disproportionately from China.

Now, here's the catch. We're not totally blameless here. If we really wanted to make a difference, one thing we could do is to stop *exporting* our trash to the countries causing the pollution.

For years, many of these countries made money by taking some of our waste for processing—meaning that, despite our positive track-record domestically, we were indirectly contributing to the problem overseas. The good news, however, is that we've already cut those exports by more than 2/3 in just the past five years<sup>7</sup>—but we could still go further.

And we can help out at the individual level too, though the most effective method may surprise you...

According to the government's NOAA (National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration), the most valuable thing we can do is clean up our local beaches.<sup>8</sup> **Because in a country that properly manages its waste, the biggest problem...is us, as individual litterers.**



For all the concern about straws and shopping bags, they're not the largest sources of litter in the United States. According to a 2020 study from Keep America Beautiful, the most frequently littered item in the country is cigarette butts.



As for bans on plastic: not only do they not do much to solve the problem, they're also riddled with unintended consequences.

Research has shown that consumers who can't get plastic grocery bags just tend to buy more plastic trash bags.<sup>9</sup> Substituting paper bags for plastic ones actually results in higher carbon emissions.<sup>10</sup> And if you ever try to drink a milkshake through a paper straw... you're gonna break a rib.

Keeping plastics out of the ocean is an important goal—which is why we should focus our efforts on the approaches that are most likely to make a real difference.

The turtles will thank you.

And so will Betty White.



[END OF SCRIPT]

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SOURCES:

- 1 [Confronting Ocean Plastic Pollution](#) – Pew Charitable Trusts
- 2 [Marine Debris: Understanding, Preventing, and Mitigating the Significant Adverse Impacts on Marine and Coastal Biodiversity](#) – United Nations
- 3 [“How a 9-Year-Old Boy’s Statistic Shaped a Debate on Straws”](#) – *New York Times*
- 4 [Plastic Pollution](#) (Hannah Ritche and Max Roser) – Our World in Data
- 5 Ibid.
- 6 [Where Does the Plastic in Our Oceans Come From?](#) (Hannah Ritche) – Our World in Data
- 7 [Exports of Scrap Plastic From the United States From 2015 to 2020](#) – Statista
- 8 [Garbage Patches Explained](#) – National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration
- 9 [Bag Leakage: The Effect of Disposable Carryout Bag Regulations on Unregulated Bags](#) (Rebecca L.C. Taylor) – SSRN
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