

Plastic; The Biggest Environmental Polluter!

Did you know that plastic doesn't decompose and as a result pollutes our environment for years on end? The United Nations Sustainable Development Goal 12 addresses responsible consumption and production. This includes strategies for managing plastic (amongst other things). Currently, the manufacture and use of plastics are not sustainable. We have chosen to focus on plastic use, in particular single-use plastics, and we believe that supermarkets are one of the biggest sources of this.

Why is single-use plastic such an issue? Plastic is harmful to living things like sea creatures such as turtles, seabirds, whales, and also humans. Plastic can harm adult turtles but is even more deadly for baby turtles. Studies have shown that many young turtles have plastic particles in their stomachs. Scientists dissected the stomachs of five different species of turtles that live in the Indian and Pacific Oceans. One of the turtles that had plastic in its stomach had so much that it caused stomach ulcers and blockages. Plastic bags cause blockages in the intestines of turtles which makes them unable to digest food properly, and as a result the affected animals slowly starve to death.

Scientists fed plastic pellets to young seabirds to see the effects. They found chemicals released by the plastic inside young seabirds' livers. These were slowly poisoning them as they were unable to digest it. They checked other seabirds, including albatrosses, and found matching results.

Did you know that 300,000 whales die every year due to entanglement in fishing nets, dying a slow death of starvation or suffocation? If a whale accidentally eats too much plastic instead of food, it will think it's full, but it won't receive a supply of energy, causing it to grow weaker and weaker, leaving it at the mercy of predators and disease. Plastic can also obstruct whales' bowels so that they are unable to digest anything.

In 2019, some people swimming in the ocean saw a whale throwing up blood. They called Darrell Blatchley, a marine animal expert, to get its body because they knew it wouldn't live. Darrel opened up the whale for a necropsy and found that it had over 88 pounds of plastic in its stomach. As the stomach acids couldn't digest the plastic, it started attacking the whale's stomach lining.

Plastic is just as harmful to humans as it is to animals. Micro pieces of plastic can infiltrate the human body through eating or inhaling which can then lead to many health problems. Examples of the health issues worsened by plastic particles include cancer, diabetes, strokes and chronic inflammation.

What did we do to reduce the plastic effects on our environment? We focused on supermarkets because we believe they are the largest source of single-use plastics. Firstly, we visited our local Countdown supermarket and our visit confirmed our concerns. In the relish/pickle aisle, we saw some of the relish in glass jars but many

were in plastic containers. We just want to know why? Maybe it's because plastic is cheaper to use as packaging?

In another aisle, we saw a lot of plastic bottles filled with water! Why have water in plastic bottles when clean water is always available and plastic-free from the tap at home? Some options supermarkets could offer include a small refund on returned plastic water/drink bottles, or selling water in a reusable drink bottle for a slightly higher price?



Photography of Emily Tipper.

Initially, we thought that Countdown knew about plastic problems, but didn't do much about it, so we sent them a [letter](#), but we were proven wrong, and here is what they emailed back:

The Manager of Countdown New Brighton thanked us for our concern for the environment. They said that they had their own concerns too and are trying as much as possible to fix their plastic waste. Countdown has already removed 150 tonnes of packing from their produce section and have also removed plastic cutlery. They told us that they have stopped selling 11.6 million packets of plastic straws and have removed most of their products with glitter. Countdown is also working on getting rid of plastic plates and estimates that it will take them around six months. Countdown mentioned that they have released their [2025 Sustainability Plan](#) and that they are 100% committed to brand new reusable packaging which is also recyclable. They added that they are always looking for new ideas and that our ones have helped them to reduce more plastic.

Another problem with buying plastic is that people don't know which bin it goes in. Our mottos are, "Don't know, no yellow," and, "If you want to stay alive, recycle 1, 2 and 5."

Below is a picture of the amount of contaminated plastic that was found in our school recycling bin. If we can't get this right at school, how confident can we be that the other recycling bins out there are being used correctly?



Photography of Melanie Field. April 14, 2021

One example of the positive effect that antiplastic campaigns can have was the complete removal of six-pack rings. These rings were very light and easily washed or blown out to sea where they became stuck around the necks of seabirds and fish and animals. Horrific photos of strangled birds and animals resulted in people avoiding buying drinks held together with the plastic rings. With consumers sending such a clear signal, producers had no choice but to find alternative means for packaging their products. Now beer cans and bottles are typically packed in recyclable cardboard.

We know that having less plastic in supermarkets may sound like a really big change because things like plastic are used a lot, and they are hard to give up. We need to all band together. Lots of people making small changes will make a big impact which means less plastic in our supermarkets, community and world. It's time to get drastic with plastic!

Emily Tipper and Amelia Gibson

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