

Plastic Pollution

When people think about plastic, they may think of lots of everyday objects that make our lives easier: food containers, toys and gadgets and even the pipes that carry water to and from our homes. In fact, plastic is so popular in the UK today that it is almost impossible to imagine life without it.

However, while plastic makes human lives easier, it makes the lives of Britain's wildlife much harder and it could be **endangering** the existence of some of our much-loved creatures.

Almost 80% of plastic produced over the last 70 years has been thrown away.



Plastic Waste Facts

160,000 plastic bags are used around the world every second.



By 2015, 6300 million metric tonnes of plastic waste had been created.



Plastic and the Environment

There are many different ways that plastic can enter the environment:

- not disposing of it properly, e.g. littering;
- washed down drains from face washes and clothing;
- spilled overboard by ships;
- escaped from factories and warehouses;
- blown out of bins or landfills by the wind;
- abandoned, e.g. fishing nets.

So much plastic enters the environment each year that it can be found in fresh water, soil, air and oceans around the world.



Of all of the plastic waste created by 2015: 9% recycled, 12% burned, 79% in landfills or the natural environment.

The Problem with Plastic

Most types of plastic are neither **biodegradable** nor **compostable**. Therefore, any plastic that ends up in the local environment will not break down over time, like it does with paper, fruit peel or natural fabrics. Plastic will simply remain where it is forever unless it is removed by humans or mistakenly consumed by wildlife.

A huge problem with the plastic that ends up in the environment is the chemicals it releases. Over time, pieces of plastic litter will break into smaller pieces. When plastic breaks into microplastics, it is eaten by wildlife that mistake it for food.

Scarily, these **microplastics** contain **toxic** chemicals and heavy metals – poisonous and deadly to local wildlife. These make their way into the food chain, affecting not only the animal that ate the plastic but any animal that then goes on to consume the first animal.



'Female Mallard Bu Water With Rubbish' by Merlin Kessel

Threats to Wildlife

The largest threats to wildlife from plastic waste in the environment are:

- death or injury caused by becoming tangled in plastic waste, for example, birds that become trapped in fishing nets or hedgehogs caught in plastic can holders;



- animals eating plastic waste by mistake, thinking that it is food, for example, some birds eat plastic bags that float in a pond because they think that they are fish;
- poisoning from the chemicals within the plastic which can lead to illness and death.



How We Can Help

People around the world have caused the plastic problem we face today and it cannot be fixed overnight. The best way to stop any further harm to wildlife is by changing how we think about and use plastic. Some helpful tips are:

- Instead of using plastic items, such as straws and plastic bags, buy reusable items, e.g. Flasks for hot drinks and canvas shopping bags.
- Glitter (which is often made of plastic) and balloons can also be damaging to the environment and dangerous to animals, who may mistake them for food.
- Recycle as much of your waste as possible.
- Safely pick up litter you see in the environment.

Glossary

biodegradable: Something that can be naturally broken down by bacteria.

compostable: Something that is biodegradable and can help support plant growth.

endanger: To put something or someone at risk or in danger.

microplastics: Extremely small pieces of plastic in the environment resulting from the breakdown of bigger pieces of plastic waste.

toxic: Something poisonous or harmful.



Questions

1. Which of these is not a way that plastic enters the environment? Tick one.

- by being blown out of bins
- by being abandoned by humans
- by being dug up from the ground
- by being washed down drains

2. Using the infographic to help you, match the percentages to the correct fact.

9%

Existing plastic that has been burned.

12%

Existing plastic which has ended up in landfills or the natural environment.

79%

Existing plastic that has been recycled.

3. Find and copy two examples of items that the text implies will break down over time.

- _____
- _____

4. ...and could be endangering the existence of some of our much-loved creatures.

Which word or phrase could the author have used instead of the word **endangering** in this sentence?

5. Find and copy one adjective from the section entitled **The Problem with Plastic** that describes the chemicals found in microplastics.

6. Summarise the section entitled **Threats to Wildlife** in 30 words or less.

7. Which fact from the text did you find most shocking? Give two reasons for your answer.

8. Fully explain the dangers of microplastics.

9. Conduct some research on the Internet. What are the UK Government currently doing to reduce the effects of plastic pollution in the UK?
