

HERE'S HOW MUCH PLASTIC TRASH IS LITTERING THE EARTH

<https://www.nationalgeographic.com/news/2017/07/plastic-produced-recycling-waste-ocean-trash-debris-environment/>

BY LAURA PARKER

PUBLISHED DECEMBER 20, 2018



Image by National Geographic

Just sixty years ago, plastic started being created in huge amounts. The amount has grown so quickly that the world has now created 8.3 billion metric tons of plastic, and most of it ends up as trash. If that seems like a crazy number, it is. Even the scientists who set out to study the world's first record of how much plastic has been created,

tossed out, burned or put in landfills, were shocked by the numbers. Only 12% of plastic trash has been burned, and plastic takes more than 400 years to break down until it disappears, which is to “decay”. So most plastic still exists in the world in some way.

The study started two years ago as scientists tried to understand the huge amount of plastic that ends up in the seas and the harm it is causing to birds, sea animals, and fish. The prediction that by 2050, the oceans will have more plastic waste than fish has become one of the most-known figures on plastic and a cry to do something about all the plastic trash.

You can't manage what you don't measure

This study is the first global study of all plastics ever made—and their fate. Of the 8.3 billion metric tons that has been created, 6.3 billion metric tons has become plastic waste. Of that, only 9% has been recycled. The majority—79%—is collecting in landfills or is in our environment as litter. Meaning: at some point, much of it ends up in the oceans, the final sink.

If this continues, by 2050, there will be 12 billion metric tons of plastic buried in landfills. That amount is 35,000 times as heavy as the Empire State Building.

Roland Geyer, the study's lead writer, says the team of scientists are trying to create a system for better handling plastic goods. “You can't manage what you don't measure,” he says. “It's not just that we make a lot, it's that we also make more, year after year.”

Geyer, an engineer by education, has studied several metals and how they're used and managed. The growth of plastic production, which so far has doubled about every 15 years, has grown faster than nearly every other man-made material. And, it is unlike every other material. Half of all steel made, for example, is used in construction, and has a very long lifespan. Half of all plastic made becomes trash in less than a year, the study found.

Much of the growth in plastic has been in the growing use of plastic packaging, which makes up for more than 40% of plastic.

Counting plastic trash around the globe

The same team, led by Jenna Jambeck, created the first study that researches the amount of plastic trash that flows into the oceans every year. That research estimated that 8 million metric tons of plastic ends up in our oceans every year. That is equal to five grocery bags of plastic trash for every foot of coastline around the world.

Gaining control of plastic trash is now such a large job that it calls for a global approach, Jambeck says, that involves rethinking plastic chemistry, design, recycling, and

shoppers. The United States ranks behind Europe (30%) and China (25%) in recycling, the study found. Recycling in the U.S. has remained at 9% since 2012.

“We as a society need to consider whether it’s worth trading off some convenience for a clean, healthy environment,” Geyer says. “For some products that are very problematic in the environment, maybe we think about using different materials. Or phasing them out.”