



Marine litter

Just because you can't see it, it doesn't mean it isn't there



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The seas and oceans are increasingly becoming the waste dump of the planet – approximately 10 million tonnes of litter end up there each year. Plastic waste is a particular problem, given its long lifetime and its tendency to degrade into ever-smaller particles. These can be eaten by marine species, with often fatal consequences. Larger items pose problems too, with huge numbers of fish lost each year to “ghost fishing”, when they are caught in nets or other fishing gear that has been lost at sea. The economic costs of clean-up are significant, with municipalities in the UK alone spending an estimated €18 million per annum on beach cleaning.¹

As part of the on-going EU-level work to tackle the problem of marine litter, the European Commission undertook a public consultation on the issue from October to December 2013. The results of the consultation have been analysed and will feed into the setting of a headline reduction target, which the Commission is preparing to propose in 2014. You can find full details on the consultation and its results at:

http://ec.europa.eu/environment/consultations/marine_litter_en.htm

Scale and sources

Measuring the amount of debris already in the seas and oceans is challenging as the marine environment is constantly in motion, and there are wide geographical and seasonal differences. In attempting to measure the prevalence of marine litter, it is thus useful to monitor the amount of new litter entering the marine environment. Litter can enter the oceans from a range of sources. Some waste is dumped directly at sea from fishing boats, cargo ships and oil rigs, but in most sea regions, up to 80% of the debris that ends up in the marine environment is transported there from land by rivers, drainage or wind.² Poor waste management near rivers or seas can contribute significantly to the problem. For this reason, land-based waste management policy is an essential part of the solution, and ensuring the implementation of legislation is crucial in preventing waste from ending up in the marine environment.



International context

Momentum has been gathering throughout the international community in recent years to tackle the scourge of marine litter. At the Rio+20 conference in 2012, countries committed to act to “achieve significant reductions in marine debris to prevent harm to the coastal and marine environment” by 2025.³ They also committed to developing coordinated regional strategies so as to tackle the impacts of marine litter.

Within the European regional sea conventions, work is already underway. A regional action plan on marine litter has been drafted for the Mediterranean, and is pending adoption by the Meeting of the Parties of the Barcelona Convention in December 2013. At the ministerial meeting of the HELCOM

Convention in October 2013, the Baltic nations agreed to develop a regional action plan by 2015, while in the North-East Atlantic, OSPAR is presently preparing a regional action plan, to be ready for the annual

meeting in June 2014. Work is also on-going in the Black Sea where parties to the Bucharest Convention are working to update the overall Strategic Action Plan including in relation to marine litter. A conference in Berlin co-organised by the German environmental authorities and the European Commission delivered inputs for these regional conventions, establishing a “toolbox” of on-going initiatives to combat marine litter.⁴

EU action

At EU level, the agreement of the 7th Environment Action Programme marked an important step forward, with Council and Parliament agreeing to the establishment of “a Union-wide quantitative reduction headline target for marine litter”. In order to make this commitment operational, the European Commission is now developing such a target in tandem with the ongoing review of the targets of the Waste Framework Directive, the Landfill Directive and the Packaging and Packaging Waste Directive. It will also take account of the reductions which could be achieved through improved public awareness and the sharing of best practice.

Member States also have a responsibility to tackle marine litter in the context of the Marine Strategy Framework Directive. As part of their obligations under this Directive, Member States must submit a Programme of Measures to the Commission by 2015, explaining how they intend to achieve “Good Environmental Status”, as judged against 11 specified descriptors of the state of the marine environment, including the prevalence and impact of marine litter.

European Environment Commissioner Janez Potočnik:
“Marine litter has now become an issue of truly global concern... Let’s free our oceans from this plague.”

¹ Commission Staff Working Document: Overview of EU policies, legislation and initiatives related to marine litter (SWD(2012) 365 final)

² Bipro Final Report (ENV.D.2/ETU/2011/0043): Study of the largest loopholes within the flow of packaging material, p. 22

³ <http://www.uncsd2012.org/thefuturewewant.html>, paragraph 163

⁴ <http://www.marine-litter-conference-berlin.info>



Let's Clean Up Europe!

If you want to be part of the solution to the marine litter problem, then mark May 10, 2014 in your calendar. That's the day when people all across Europe will be mobilised for the "Let's Clean Up Europe!" initiative. The event will bring together a series of grassroots campaigns for a coordinated day of action to clean up our cities, countryside and of course our beaches. Join Commissioner Potočnik and thousands of other citizens by registering at:

<http://www.ewwr.eu/lets-clean-up-europe>.

More information

DG Environment webpage on marine litter:

http://ec.europa.eu/environment/marine/good-environmental-status/descriptor-10/index_en.htm

Public consultation on marine litter target:

http://ec.europa.eu/environment/consultations/marine_litter_en.htm