

What is Marine Litter?

Marine litter (sometimes called marine debris) is any persistent, manufactured or processed solid material, which is discarded, disposed of or abandoned in the marine and coastal environment. Marine litter consists of mostly very slowly degradable waste items such as plastic, polystyrene, metals and glass.



Marine litter is found on the beaches and shores, on the water surface, in the water column and on the seabed. It can be found near the source of input but also can be transported over a long distances with sea currents and winds.

Marine litter causes marine environmental, economic, health and aesthetic problems, including possible transfer of toxic substances and invasive species, destruction of marine habitats and loss of biodiversity. It also threatens marine life through entanglement, suffocation and ingestion as well as poses a risk to human health and life. (Find more at <http://marine-litter.gpa.unep.org>)



Marine litter entering the marine and coastal environment has multiple sources that can be divided into two major sources: ship-based (sea-based) sources and land-based sources.

| Main sea-based sources | Main land-based sources |
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| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Merchant shipping, ferries and cruise liners; • Fishing vessels; • Military fleets and research vessels; • Pleasure craft; • Offshore oil and gas platforms; • Aquaculture installations; • Waterway recreational activities (such as diving and marinas) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Municipal landfills (waste dumps) located on the coast; • Riverine transport of waste from landfills or other sources along rivers and other inland waterways (canals); • Discharge of untreated municipal sewage and storm water (including occasional overflows); • Industrial facilities (solid waste from landfills and untreated water); and • Tourism (recreational visitors to the coast and beach goers) |



Marine debris doesn't fall from the sky, it falls from human hands and human hands have the power to stop it.

Although marine litter is made up of all sorts of materials and products and comes from both land and marine sources, relatively lightweight plastics often float, making some plastics more visible than other types of marine debris.

While plastics have received the bulk of attention, photographs of the ocean floor identify other problems, such as bottles, cans and all sorts of marine equipment and other refuse. As much as 70% of marine debris sinks to the ocean floor, according to the United Nations Environmental Program.

Derelict fishing gear is an especially dangerous form of marine debris, particularly for marine life.

For all these reasons, truly effective solutions must focus on preventing all types of litter from entering our waterways and oceans. Ocean litter has no geographic or political boundaries, so solutions must involve international partnerships and be global in scope.



Marine litter is found in all the oceans of the world, not only in densely populated regions, but also in remote places far from obvious sources and human activities.

Marine litter is a complex issue with significant implications for the marine and coastal environment and human activities all over the world. The problems it causes are both cultural and multi-sectoral, rooted in poor solid waste management practices, extensive use of marine resources, lack of infrastructure, indiscriminate human activities and behaviors, and an inadequate understanding on the part of the public of the potential consequences of their actions.

Marine litter produces a wide variety of negative environmental, economic, safety, health and cultural impacts. Most marine litter has a very slow rate of decomposition, leading to a gradual, but significant accumulation in the coastal and marine environment.

Despite several international, regional and national efforts to reverse this trend, the problem continues to grow. As a result, there is an increasingly urgent need to attack this issue through more efficient and effective enforcement of laws and regulations, coordinated and expanded outreach and educational campaigns, and the employment of strong economic instruments and incentives for prevention and abatement. Because marine litter originates from both ocean and land-based sources, efforts to reduce or prevent its introduction and accumulation in the marine and coastal environment need to be implemented in coastal communities and across all sectors of society. This implies changing the attitudes and ultimately the behaviors of individuals in many different circumstances.

