

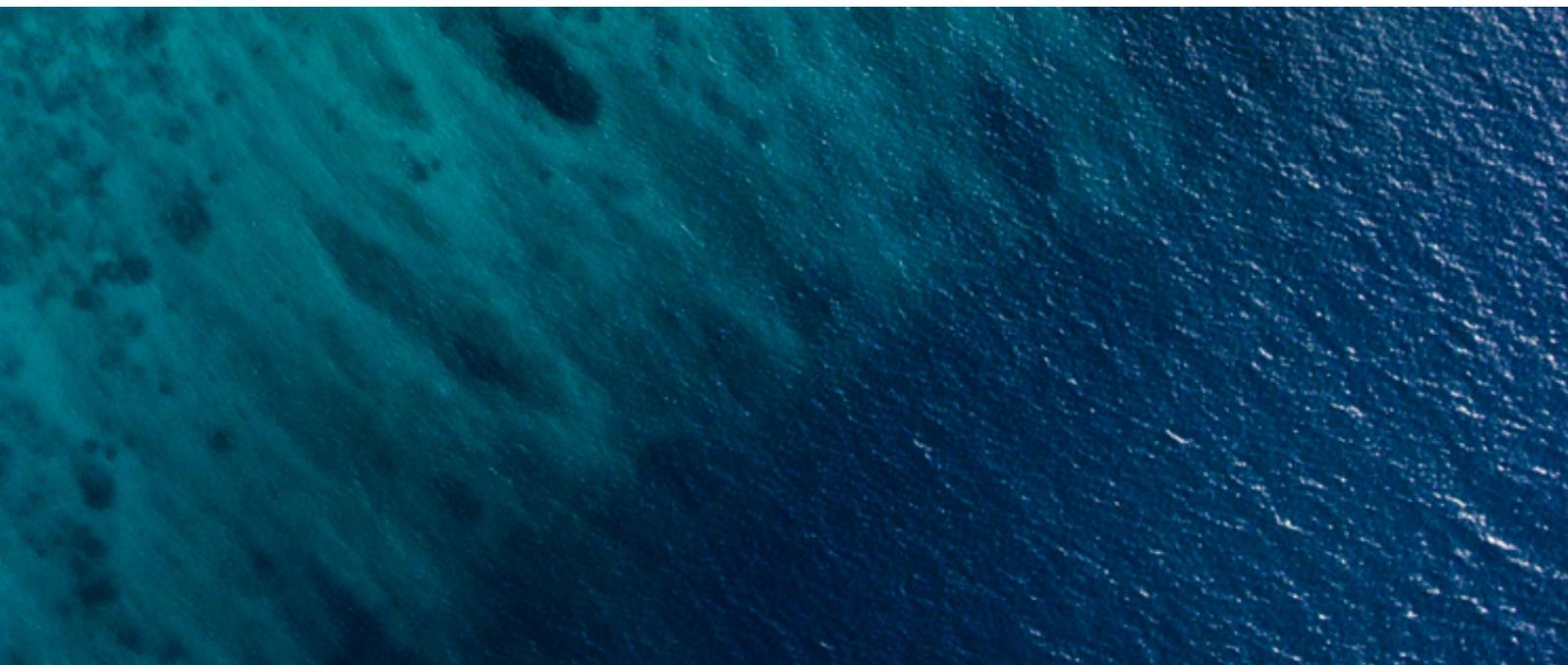


MARCH 2018

# **OCEANS GOVERNANCE AND PLASTICS**

## A REVIEW OF THE MARINE PLASTIC LANDSCAPE

FACTSHEET



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# INTRODUCTION

For scientists, it is becoming extremely clear and increasingly alarming that world's oceans are reaching their tipping point within the natural system, mainly as a result of the global plastic pollution crisis. Over the past few years, both political and public concern about the state of our oceans and marine pollution has increased, reaching a level of worry comparable to that of climate change as an environmental issue. The link between oceans and climate change is indeed one worth highlighting: as climate changes, so do oceans.

Observations have led to the critical realisation that world's ocean health is in distress. As Peter Thomson, the former president of the United Nations General Assembly, stated last year, "the ocean is in trouble", and thus global action is urgently required. For these reasons, the United Nations declared the years 2021-2030 as the 'Decade of Ocean Science for Sustainable Development'. Even more recently, at the World Economic Forum 2018 in Davos, a project called New Vision for the Ocean (NVO) was launched with the aim to improve ocean management while exploring cutting-edge technologies and solutions to protect the blue. Overall, there is a true momentum to improve the state of our oceans at international and regional levels.





# HARNESSING GLOBAL ACTIONS FOR OCEANS

In June 2017, the United Nations held its first-ever Ocean Conference to discuss the implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, notably SDG 14. This week-long conference was an opportunity for the world to better understand the perils that lie ahead for the world's oceans – including warming, acidification, declining fish stocks, marine litter and growing hypoxic areas where marine life can simply no longer exist. The conference also tried to raise the level of awareness among decision-makers and the corporate world on marine pollution, with one of the key message being that there will be more plastic in the oceans than fish by 2050. Participants agreed it is time to reverse the cycle of decline in which oceans have been trapped, especially when looking at the increasing amount of evidence demonstrating that oceans are reaching their ecological limits as a result of human activity.

Outcomes from the June conference were forward-looking. A new and ambitious political declaration and a 14-point Call for Action were launched to reverse the decline of ocean health as well as to galvanise global commitment and partnerships. A wide range of innovative solutions were also displayed following multilateral dialogues, and around 1400 voluntary commitments were expressed for ocean action.

Heads of State together with government and senior representatives reaffirmed their commitment to SDG 14 to conserve and sustainably use the oceans and marine resources. This gathering of some 6000 participants, including NGOs, civil society, the science sector, academia as well as the private sector and member states, was a great example of global cooperation – oceans were not only seen as a common heritage of humankind but as a source of life to us all. By breaking down the silos between governments and other sectors and by seeking for innovative solutions, the 14-point Call for Action marks a turning point in the international approach to the management and conservation of the ocean.

Concretely, the conference focused on scaling up solutions and the voluntary commitment to action, recognising that the wellbeing of present and future generations is closely linked to the health and productivity of oceans. For this reason, countries collectively agreed to act decisively and urgently to make a meaningful difference to citizens, the planet and prosperity. In the 14-point Call for Action, member states jointly agreed to develop robust and long-term strategies to reduce the use of plastics and microplastics, tiny fragments of plastic below 5 mm in size. Many countries announced steps to reduce or eliminate various single-use plastics, such as plastic shopping bags, while others declared that they would step up efforts to reduce the amount of sewage and pollution entering the oceans from land-based activities. The idea of implementing and sharing innovative technologies was also brought up.

As stated in the Call for Action, participants affirmed the need to enhance conservation and sustainable use of oceans and their resources by implementing law as reflected in the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea. This Convention provides the legal framework for the conservation and sustainable use of oceans and their resources. Furthermore, it encourages to prevent and minimise waste, develop sustainable consumption and production patterns, adopt the 3Rs – reduce, reuse and recycle – by incentivising market-based solutions to reduce waste, improve mechanisms for environmentally-sound waste management, disposal and recycling, and develop alternative products biodegradable under natural conditions.

# SAILING THROUGH THE OCEAN-PLASTIC ISSUE

At European level, following the Paris Agreement and its entry into force in November 2016 but also as a response to the UN 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, the European Commission decided to strengthen its ocean-related actions to implement national and international commitments. It issued a Joint Communication entitled 'Europe's international ocean governance initiative', proposing a set of actions for safe, clean and sustainably managed oceans as well as for better governance based on a cross-sectoral, rule-based international approach. This document, while intending to link internal and external security dimensions of good ocean governance, set out a new agenda with three main priorities: 1) Improve the international ocean governance framework; 2) Reduce human pressure on the oceans and create the conditions for a sustainable blue economy; 3) Strengthen international ocean research and data. Through this Joint Communication, the Commission stressed that under the 'Circular Economy Action Plan' adopted in 2015, the European Union will propose a strategy on plastics, which will contribute to reducing marine litter by at least 30% by 2020. Having previously felt like a fish out of water, Europe finally decided to consider marine litter as a major threat to oceans.

To make waves, the EU hosted the 2017 edition of Our Ocean Conference under the Maltese Council Presidency. The conference generated an unprecedented level of ambition with 437 tangible and measurable commitments; €7.2 billion in financial pledges; and 2.5 million square kilometres of new Marine Protected Areas. With over 100 commitments made by the private sector, the conference managed to mobilise the corporate world around ocean conservation. The EU's 36 commitments alone amounted to over €550 million, and together with the European Investment Bank and its member states, the total European pledge exceeded €2.8 billion. Europe truly stood up and demonstrated its leading role in taking action for the preservation and sustainable use of oceans and certainly earned respect from its counterparts. Among its objectives, the EU announced it will commit to marine pollution prevention and preparedness. The EU also explained that, as part of its upcoming plastics strategy, it would announce draft measures to reduce the leakage of plastics into the environment by the end of 2017. Resulting from this, the European Commission decided to phase out all single-use plastic cups in water fountains and vending machines in all its buildings and meetings by the end of 2017. This effort does not appear to be plain sailing, however.

Nevertheless, with its focus on high level engagement, partnerships and action, Europe continues to drive other efforts from the international agenda, such as the delivery of the SDGs under Agenda 2030. The conference in itself also complemented Europe's international ocean governance initiative.

**“Having previously felt like a fish out of water, Europe finally decided to consider marine litter as a major threat to oceans”**

## Europe's plastics industry



1,5 million jobs



€350 billion in annual revenue (in 2016)

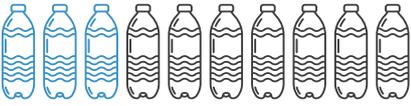


Ten rivers contribute to **90%** of plastics flowing into the oceans

8 of them are located in **Asia**



By 2020, the EU strategy on plastics should contribute to **reducing marine litter by at least**

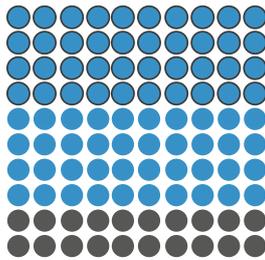
**30%** 



Europe is due to invest

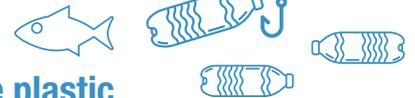
**€2.8 billion** in ocean action

**80%** of marine debris is plastic



**50%** are single-use plastics items

By 2050, there will be **more plastic** in the oceans than fish



**ONLY IN EUROPE**



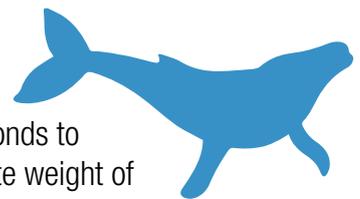
**500,000 tonnes** of plastic reach the oceans **every year**

**OVER 90%** of all seabirds have pieces of **plastic** in their stomachs



which corresponds to the approximate weight of

**4,350 blue whales**



## Plastic recycling in Europe

**31%**



2017

Europe already has the world's highest rate of plastic recycling

2020

2025

A study by Plastics Recycling Europe (PRE) showed that an even more ambitious target of 65% recycling for plastic packaging in Europe is achievable by 2025

**55%**



2030

EU legally-binding agreement

# DIVING INTO EUROPE'S PLASTIC STRATEGY

With around 5 to 13 million tonnes of plastic – 1.5 to 4% of global plastics production – entering the ocean annually, Europe has understood it needs to act now to find all-encompassing solutions to protect the blue and relieve oceans from continuous intoxication. One of the solutions to alter the situation was the much awaited 'European Strategy for Plastics in a Circular Economy', released in January 2018. Back in December 2015, while adopting the 'Circular Economy Action Plan', the Commission identified plastics as a priority and committed to "prepare a strategy addressing the challenges posed by plastics throughout the value chain and taking into account their entire life-cycle". Over the course of 2017, the Commission confirmed the focus will be on plastics production and use, insisting it will work on ensuring that all plastic packaging is reusable or recyclable in a cost-effective manner by 2030. The final strategy aims to bend the curb of plastic pollution and its severe impacts on citizens and the environment.

This strategy comes at a time when Europe has realised it failed to reap the economic benefits of the circular economy. Too often plastics – due to the way they are produced, used and discarded – harm the natural environment, and oceans are the first victim. Europe decided to tackle its plastic-related problem for good, freeing itself from over-dependence, consumption and inefficient mass production of plastics. However, plastics are crucial when it comes to safety and innovation, and they contribute to Europe's economic growth. The plastic industry is a significant player in the European economy, as it represented 1.5 million jobs and €350 billion in annual revenue in 2016. Increasing the industry's sustainability is an unavoidable prerequisite to protect the environment but can also bring new grounds for innovation, competitiveness and job creation. It is therefore a true challenge that Europe can turn into an opportunity.

The paradox is that plastic is all but virtuous when it comes to the environment. For oceans alone, the UN Environment estimates that impacts to marine ecosystems amount to at least €6.5 billion per year globally. Consequently, the Commission stressed, "To rethink and improve the functioning of such a complex value chain requires efforts and greater cooperation by all its key players, from plastic producers to recyclers, retailers and consumers". Strong innovation and a common vision to drive investment the right way are needed to achieve a truly circular lifecycle for plastics.

The EU plastic strategy showcases key engagements for action at European level. However, all sectors of society, including individual member states, regions, cities, corporations and citizens, need to be brought together. Furthermore, robust commitments from other world leaders are fundamental to drive change beyond Europe's own frontiers. On this particular point, China announced in January 2018 that it will ban all plastic waste import. This encourages Europe to do more, as China will not accept its waste anymore. The new 'European Waste Package', expected for the first Quarter of 2018, will thus need to contain ambitious, legally binding targets that take China's decision into account.

Looking at the millions of tonnes of mismanaged plastic debris – of which the EU is argued to account for around 150,000 to 500,000 tonnes – that enter the oceans every year it is easy to understand the scale of the impact. Estimates state that over 80% of marine debris is plastic, among which 50% are single-use plastics. These are transported, washed up, broken into microplastics or trapped into one of oceans' five gyres. Microplastics, as explained in the Plastic Strategy, stem from various sources, "either from un-sustainably managed waste streams, fibres from synthetic clothing or from personal care and cosmetic products as microbeads". The cost of such pollution affects various industries, including tourism, shipping and fisheries. Together with the growing public concern, this triggered the Commission to adopt its new strategy to reduce plastics.

**“Increasing the industry’s sustainability is an unavoidable prerequisite to protect the environment but can also bring new grounds for innovation, competitiveness and job creation”**

# TURNING THE TIDE BY TRANSFORMING RISKS INTO OPPORTUNITIES

Across Europe, stakeholders support safer and more sustainable production and consumption patterns, thus offering room for innovation, entrepreneurship and new leadership. While Europe already has the world's highest rate of plastic recycling, roughly 31% in 2017, most plastics still end up in landfills or are otherwise destroyed. Nevertheless, with its new objectives on improved recyclability of packaging and increased recycling rates – EU member states and the Parliament reached a legally-binding agreement in December 2017 to recycle 55% of plastic packaging waste and 70% of all packaging by 2030 – Europe is foreseen to drive this transformation and encourage the world to follow its lead. A recent study by Plastics Recycling Europe (PRE) showed that an even more ambitious target of recycling 65% of plastic packaging in Europe is achievable by 2025.

To ensure Europe manages to prevent and reduce plastic leakage into the environment and our oceans, a number of preventive measures should be deployed. This includes the implementation of adequate plastic waste prevention and management systems; effective waste collection initiatives by supporting higher recycling rates and better waste collection; cutting the consumption of plastic bags and single-use plastic; ensuring that the private sector runs a tight ship, and improving safety and leakage of plastics.

In addition, Europe also plays an important role in promoting best practices. For instance, by supporting global, national and regional action, EU funding contributes to improving waste management, combatting the rise of marine litter and developing innovative and disruptive technologies to clean up the seas in Europe and abroad. The Commission also decided to facilitate cooperation in waste management and recycling between the outermost regions of Europe, including countries in the Caribbean Sea, the Atlantic and the Indian and Pacific Oceans. For 2018, the Commission announced it will launch a targeted project in Southeast Asia to reduce plastic waste and marine litter and support the review of the Barcelona Convention to reduce plastic pollution in the Mediterranean.

At international level, global leadership is changing. Fora such as the G7, G20, COPs and the UN have become places where new declarations are adopted by world leaders. During the 2017 G20 meeting in Germany, political leaders adopted the 'G20 Marine Litter Action Plan', aimed at taking action to prevent and reduce all kinds of marine litter, from single-use plastics to microplastics. The G20 reiterated its commitment "to preventing and substantially reducing marine litter and its impact by 2025 in support of the Sustainable Development Goals and targets related to marine pollution, waste management, sustainable consumption and production". The Action Plan served as a source of inspiration for the European Commission, as it highlights the importance of ensuring producers' responsibility for their products through extended producer responsibility (EPR). As the Institute for European Environmental Policy (IEEP) states, "EPR systems promote takeback, reuse and recycling and can contribute to reducing marine litter". On a separate note, the Commission declared it will contribute to the newly established working group to address plastic marine litter and microplastics, following the resolution adopted by the UN Environment Assembly in December 2017.



## RECOMMENDATIONS

The momentum for better ocean governance and reduced marine litter is welcome and on the rise. However, given the scale of the problem and the state of our oceans, it seems strategies, declarations and action plans are only a drop in the ocean, and they alone will not solve the wide range of issues in the coming years. Cities, for example, have a particular role to play in addressing the issue of ocean health, notably by controlling what flows into their rivers: indeed, it is estimated that ten rivers around the world, eight of which are located in Asia, contribute to 90% of plastics flowing into the oceans.

Europe and other international players should take the lead and demonstrate that supporting critical innovations, financing strategic research and adopting a new and consistent ‘reducing-reusing-recycling’ circular model allow economic growth, jobs and sustainable development spur. The corporate world should also grasp the opportunities lying ahead and address the challenges linked to the production, consumption and end-of-life of plastics, covering the entire value chain and shifting towards a circular and low-carbon blue economy.

Finally, citizens, through their actions and with the support of civil society organisations and NGOs, play a major role: it is time for citizens to change their consumption patterns, act responsibly and decrease their dependence on all kinds of plastics, from microbeads to single-use and oxo-fragmentable plastics. For all the services they offer as climate regulators, carbon sinks, food providers and more, oceans deserve to be kept healthy and remain as the blue lungs of the planet. It is our shared responsibility to keep hazards at bay.

**“While Europe already has the world’s highest rate of plastic recycling, roughly 31% in 2017, most plastics still end up in landfills or are otherwise destroyed”**

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