

Note on Plastic Pollution

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Editorial

Plastic pollution is the accumulation of plastic objects and particles (e.g. plastic bottles, bags and microbeads) in the Earth's environment that adversely affects wildlife, wildlife habitat, and humans. Plastics that act as pollutants are categorized into micro-, meso-, or macro debris, based on size. Plastics are inexpensive and durable, and as a result levels of plastic production by humans are high. However, the chemical structure of most plastics renders them resistant to many natural processes of degradation and as a result they are slow to degrade. Plastic pollution can afflict land, waterways and oceans. It is estimated that 1.1 to 8.8 million tons of plastic waste enters the ocean from coastal communities each year. Living organisms, particularly marine animals, can be harmed either by mechanical effects, such as entanglement in plastic objects, problems related to ingestion of plastic waste, or through exposure to chemicals within plastics that interfere with their physiology. Many kinds of plastics exist depending on their precursors and the method for their

polymerization. Depending on their chemical composition, plastics and resins have varying properties related to contaminant absorption and adsorption. Polymer degradation takes much longer as a result of saline environments and the cooling effect of the sea. These factors contribute to the persistence of plastic debris in certain environments. It is estimated that a foam plastic cup will take 50 years, a plastic beverage holder will take 400 years, a disposable nappy will take 450 years, and fishing line will take 600 years to degrade.

The use of biodegradable plastics has many advantages and disadvantages. Biodegradables are biopolymers that degrade in industrial composters. Biodegradables do not degrade as efficiently in domestic composters, and during this slower process, methane gas may be emitted. Although biodegradable and degradable plastics have helped reduce plastic pollution, there are some drawbacks. One issue concerning both types of plastics is that they do not break down very efficiently in natural environments. There, degradable plastics that are oil-based may break down into smaller fractions, at which point they do not degrade further.

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