

ACP Plastic Pollution Frequently Asked Questions

Below are responses to questions that may be asked by aquarium audiences on ocean plastic pollution and ACP's strategy for advancing solutions.



If people stop littering on beaches, will that solve the problem?

Plastic used on land reaches the ocean in a number of ways—and litter on beaches is only one of them. Plastic trash, both in coastal and inland areas, makes its way to the ocean via rivers, storm drains and other waterways. Some lightweight plastic, such as thin bags and polystyrene foam, can travel by air. The situation is worse in places that lack effective waste management services.

The biggest problem is that we aren't cleaning up plastic pollution fast enough to prevent it from polluting the environment. The rate at which we're producing and using plastic—now up to 407 million tons a year—is exceeding our ability to keep it out of the ocean. Beach cleanups and recycling are important, but reducing our plastic use is even more crucial. We need to turn down the tap while we clean up the mess.

Why should Americans take action? Isn't most ocean plastic pollution coming from other countries?

The U.S. is 20th on the list of top plastic polluting countries. In other words, while we aren't the worst polluter globally, there is significant room for improvement.

Although our waste management systems are well developed, the U.S. generates more plastic trash per person—270 pounds per year—than most anywhere in the world. The U.S. is also home to many of the top consumer brands that are packaging their products in plastic at an increasing rate. What we do in the U.S. matters around the world; solutions adopted by U.S. consumers, business and government can become models for the rest of the world.

I recycle. Isn't that enough?

It's a start—but it's not enough. Only 9 percent of plastic waste is recycled each year in the United States. To complicate matters, not all of the plastic we put in our recycling bins is actually recycled. The recycling market fluctuates a lot based on supply and demand, and currently, the demand for recycled plastic scrap is at an all-time low.

Additionally, some plastic products simply can't be recycled, if certain chemicals or materials have been added. Unlike metal or glass, most recyclable plastic loses quality each time it's recycled, and eventually still ends up in the landfill—or in the ocean. Today, the growth of plastic production is far outpacing the rate at which the world is recycling plastic waste.

We need to do more to close this gap. By using less plastic and choosing more environmentally responsible alternatives, consumers can send a signal to businesses and governments that change is needed.

Are your aquariums against all plastic?

No, not at all. In many cases, the use of plastic has increased human health and safety, and enhanced the performance of important products we use every day, from cars to computers. At our aquariums, we use plastic in our exhibits and in other operations. But in light of the growing body of science that shows how plastic pollution is impacting ocean health, we are taking steps to reduce our plastic consumption, especially single-use plastic, and encouraging our audiences to do the same.

Today, the global rate of plastic production is outpacing our ability to manage it in a sustainable way. That's why we've chosen to use plastic more effectively and efficiently, avoid what we don't need, and inspire the advancement of more sustainable alternatives.

Does your aquarium use plastic straws and other forms of single-use plastic?

We're making a serious effort to cut down on our own use of plastic. In 2017, 22 aquariums across the US joined a commitment to eliminate plastic bags and to only provide single-use plastic straws on request. To date, collectively we have eliminated an estimated 5 million straws in just one year! We have also collectively committed to eliminate plastic beverage bottles (by 2020). We're always looking for new ways to reduce our own plastic consumption, and we encourage our visitors to consider alternatives to plastic whenever possible.

Doesn't fishing gear make up a bigger percentage of ocean plastic pollution than straws?

Abandoned and lost fishing gear is a significant source of ocean plastic pollution. A [study published in Nature](#) reported that fishing nets account for at least 46 percent of the trash in surface waters of the Great Pacific Garbage Patch, and an [impact assessment](#) by the European Commission found that plastic fishing gear makes up 27 percent of beach litter in the EU.

Marine life can become entangled in this derelict fishing gear (such as nets, lines, traps and pots), leading to injury and death. We need to take more action to prevent, and clean up, lost gear. The Aquarium supports action by the fishing industry, working with government and others, to address the problem by implementing best practices, designing improved gear, and instituting gear recovery and recycling programs.

With so many other sources of plastic pollution, why are aquariums focusing on straws?

Almost 9 million U.S. tons of plastic enters the ocean from land every year. If nothing is done, the volume of plastic flowing from land to sea is expected to double by 2025. Much of this plastic is from consumer products and packaging, which means the people who use these products—and the businesses that produce them—can play direct and meaningful roles in solving this problem. Reducing our use of single-use plastic, including plastic straws, is a great first step.

Plastic straws are among the most common types of litter picked up during beach cleanups. Plastic straws consistently show up among the top 10 items collected in beach cleanups around the world. Most are made of a petroleum byproduct called polypropylene, often mixed with other chemicals. They don't biodegrade under natural conditions, and they can't easily be recycled due to their small size. Instead, they persist on our planet for hundreds of years—breaking down into smaller and smaller pieces without being assimilated back into the environment. This means it's likely that almost every plastic straw ever used is still with us, either on land or in the ocean.

Much of the plastic in the ocean—including microplastic distributed throughout the water column comes from consumer products. Working together across sectors, we can address plastic pollution coming both from land and from sea. The First Step campaign raises public awareness of plastic pollution, and empowers consumers and businesses to take a first step toward solutions by skipping plastic straws.