

Defending Our Oceans

"Greenpeace is committed to defending the health of the world's oceans and the plants, animals and people that depend upon them."

Plastic pollution
a growing threat to the health of our oceans



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Our oceans remain one of the final frontiers: unexplored, unknown, and in some places, unreachable. Every second breath we take comes from the oceans. We rely on them for food, for recreation, and the very life we all too often take for granted. In return, we are choking them with pollution and destroying the marine environments that enable us to live rich and enjoyable lives. One key way to reverse the destruction is a global network of marine reserves.

Currently less than one percent of the world's oceans is protected. However, earlier this year the United States took two important steps to add to that tiny total. In June, US President, George Bush designated the area surrounding the Northwestern Hawaiian Islands as a National Monument, the first marine area to be made a National Monument, affording it extraordinary protection and at the stroke of a pen, creating the world's largest marine reserve. Weeks later, California Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger declared around 18% of California's coastal waters off-limits, or severely restricted, to fishing.

Covering 140,000 square miles, the waters around the Northwestern Hawaiian Islands contain delicate ecosystems with over 4,500 square miles of relatively undisturbed coral reefs and give shelter to more than 7,000 different marine species. Hawaii is a unique place, both ecologically and culturally.

Protecting large areas of ocean is necessary to give marine life time to recover, from overfishing and other destructive practise, as well as protecting vital habitats.

Scientists admit that the oceans are not well understood. More people have travelled to the moon than the deep ocean and there are more maps of the moon than there are of the oceans. All too often the damage is done before the value of what is lost is ever known.

A growing threat to the health of our oceans is pollution.

In past centuries on beaches everywhere, including those encircling the Hawaiian islands, beachcombing could be a profitable business, offering a potential treasure chest of material washed ashore from ships sailing the vast oceans. Today what is washed up on most beaches is far less appealing or rewarding and is only a small part of the massive amount of pollution that is dumped or flushed into the sea every year.

The world's largest marine reserve sits next to one of the world's largest floating garbage dumps. Between Hawaii and the United States mainland is the North Pacific Gyre, the epicenter of a giant circulating system of winds and currents encompassing the whole North Pacific. Plastic pollution from Asia, the Pacific and North America is sucked into this area, where it mingles with sea life, choking and ensnaring marine wildlife, and disturbing every level of the food chain.

Estimated to be the size of Texas, this phenomenon provides a stark reminder of the threat that plastic poses to marine life. Because it doesn't break down, such pollution can linger for years affecting marine environments far from where it entered the ocean.

The scale of pollution in all our oceans is vast. The majority of the plastic – 80% – comes directly from land. Whales, dolphins, turtles seals and countless other marine life have become victims of land litter. Marine debris is found floating on all the world's oceans, even near to polar regions, it also contaminates the seabed. It is found everywhere, from the beaches of industrialised countries to the shores of the remotest, uninhabited islands.

On Hawaii the story of one albatross chick graphically illustrates the danger of marine pollution. Discovered by photographer, Susan Middleton, the chick had sheltered in her equipment shed, but soon became ill and died. An autopsy showed the young chick had a stomach full of hundreds of piece of plastic, picked up from the ocean by its mother. Fifty-five of the sixty chicks that where subsequently examined on the island had died with their stomachs full of plastic trash.

Marine pollution will only be stopped if all nations adopt a "Zero Waste" plan, including waste reduction, reuse and recycling. Ultimately, ocean protection must begin on land.

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The end of a piece of coral wrapped in clear plastic, a baby swordfish, halobates (black creatures) and copepods (small blue creatures) collected by the Greenpeace marine debris sampler.



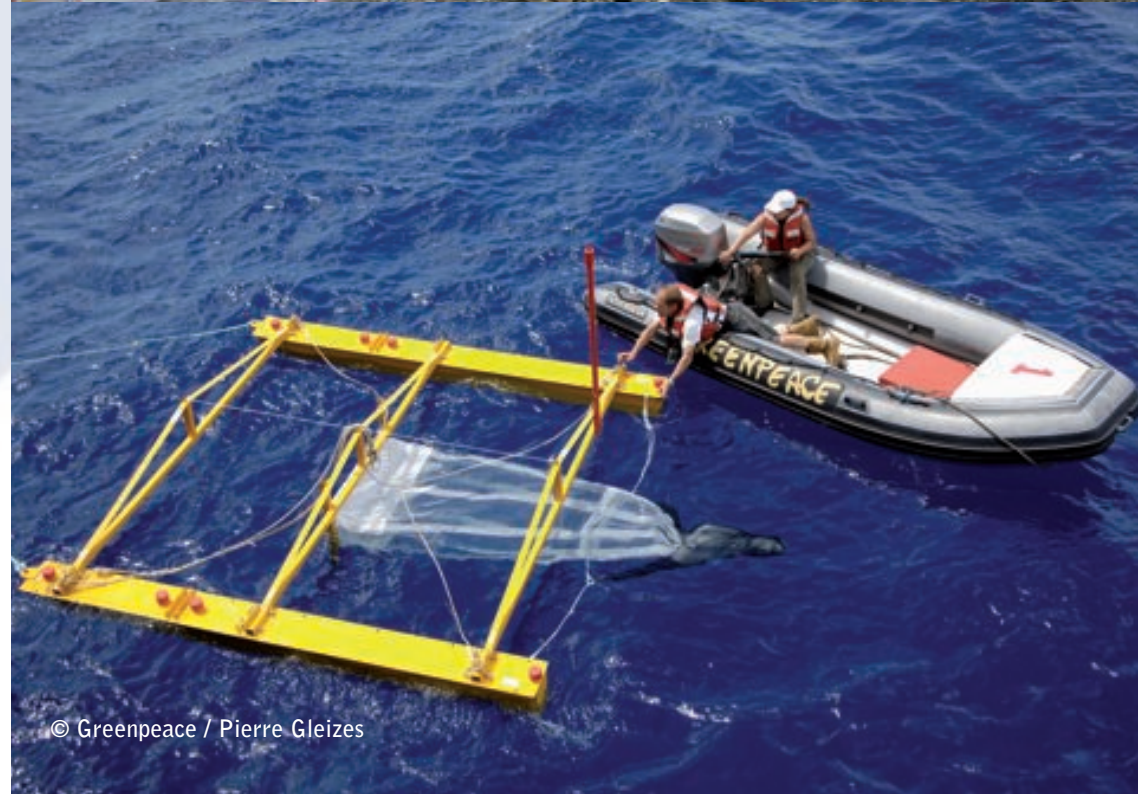
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Blue polycarbonate packaging with coral starting to grow on it, collected by the Greenpeace marine debris sampler.

MY Esperanza crew towing the Greenpeace marine debris plastic sampler to evaluate ocean pollution.



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Greenpeace is an independent, campaigning organisation, which uses non-violent, creative confrontation to expose global environmental problems, and to force solutions essential to a green and peaceful future

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