

The Plastic Problem

Take a moment to do a quick survey of how much plastic there is in the room you're in. Did you find any? I bet you did. There may well be plastic in the chair you're sitting on, the pen you're holding or the packaging for your snack. That's only the visible plastic though – chances are there is more plastic that you didn't spot. Even the clothes you're wearing probably have plastic in them!

Plastic is such a useful material – it can be strong or flexible, it can be clear or colourful, it can be shaped and moulded into anything you like. It is versatile, cheap and even better, it's really durable.

Great!

Well, sort of.

You see, a lot of plastic is only used for a few minutes, hours or days and then it's thrown away. A plastic shopping bag is used for an average of 12 minutes. And what then? The vast majority of the world's plastic isn't recycled but ends up in landfill or in the sea. Every day, about 8 million pieces of plastic pollution end up in the oceans. It's a little bit like you filled a bin lorry just with plastic and then tipped it into the ocean. Not once but every single minute of every single day. That's a lot of plastic. Even worse, plastic doesn't just disappear - it can last up to a whopping 500 years!

I wonder if you've ever seen plastic bottles or packaging littering a beach? This plastic may have been left there by day trippers or may have been transported there on ocean currents from far-flung places. Either way, it's an unsightly mess but, even worse, animals can get caught in plastic waste and die. Other creatures may die from eating plastic by mistake – whales, seabirds, turtles and fish have all been found with plastic in their stomachs. Around 100,000 mammals and over one million sea birds die every year around the world as a result of plastic pollution. That's pretty shocking, isn't it?



Even when you can't see the plastic any more, it may well still be there. The plastic breaks down into tiny microplastics and these minute fragments end up in the fish that we eat, the water that we drink and the air that we breathe. Plastic for breakfast anyone? It doesn't sound all that tempting, does it? The microplastics spread all around the world: they are on the sea bed, frozen in sea ice and have been found near the summit of Mount Everest!

At the moment, the problem is only getting worse. More and more plastic is getting produced and there are predictions that by 2050, there will be more plastic in the sea than fish! Quite simply, if we keep making plastic without solving the problem of what to do with it when it's outlived its usefulness, we are storing up big problems for our planet and all those living things – including ourselves – that exist on it. Suddenly plastic's not seeming quite as fantastic, is it?

RETRIEVAL FOCUS

1. What does versatile mean?
2. Which word in the first paragraph tells us that plastic lasts a long time?
3. Which phrase tells us that most of the rubbish ends up in landfill or the ocean?
4. What word, describing litter on beaches, is closest in meaning to unattractive?
5. What two words are used to tell us that microplastics are very small.

VIPERS QUESTIONS

R

How long can plastic last?

R

What are microplastics?

S

What happens to microplastics?

E

According to the writer, is durability a good thing in plastics? Why or why not?

E

Is this text formal or informal? How do you know?