



**MESSAGE OF THE EXECUTIVE SECRETARY**

**OF THE**

**CONVENTION ON BIOLOGICAL DIVERSITY**

**DR. CRISTIANA PAȘCA PALMER**

**on the occasion of**

**EARTH DAY**

**22 April 2018**

*“End plastic pollution”*

Plastic is everywhere, a part of our daily lives. However, the convenience of plastics now threatens the very survival of our planet.

Plastic pollution affects every part of the world. Plastic washes onto beaches of all the world’s oceans and settles even on their deepest ocean floors. It poisons coral reefs. We now know that plastic pollution at the small and micro scales is accumulating in the food chain and eventually making its way onto our dinner plates.

But there are things that we as individuals can do through our choices and our actions.

Unless we take these steps, the problem is not going away. In 1950, the world’s population of 2.5 billion produced 1.5 million tons of plastic; in 2016, a global population of more than 7 billion people produced over 300 million tons of plastic. According to a recent study<sup>1</sup>, of all the non-recycled plastic produced to date, only 9 per cent of that waste has been recycled, only 12 per cent incinerated, with the remaining 79 per cent accumulating in landfills and the natural environment.

The oceans are particularly affected. Marine debris, in particular the accumulation of plastic debris, has now been identified as a global problem as large as other key issues of our time – including climate change, ocean acidification and biodiversity loss. Each year, over 8 million tonnes of plastic ends up in

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<sup>1</sup> *Production, use, and fate of all plastics ever made*, Roland Geyer<sup>1</sup>, Jenna R. Jambeck<sup>2</sup> and Kara Lavender Law<sup>3</sup> 1Bren School of Environmental Science and Management, University of California, Santa Barbara, Santa Barbara, CA, USA. 2 College of Engineering, University of Georgia, 412 Driftmier Engineering Center, Athens, GA, USA. 3 Sea Education Association, Woods Hole, MA, USA. *Science Advances*, 19 Jul 2017: Vol. 3, no. 7,



the oceans, devastating marine wildlife, fisheries and tourism, and costing at least \$8 billion in damage to marine ecosystems.

Up to 80 per cent of all litter in our oceans is made of plastic. Some estimates suggest that we are dumping so many items, such as plastic bottles, bags and cups after a single use that by 2050 oceans will carry more plastic than fish, and an estimated 99 per cent of seabirds will have ingested plastic. Sea creatures that eat or get ensnared in plastic debris can also be killed or maimed.

Many marine organisms can't distinguish common plastic items from food. So they consume it. And because plastic is not biodegradable, over time it breaks into smaller and smaller pieces. Eventually these pieces become small enough to enter the bloodstream of marine organisms, remaining present until the organism is eaten. Marine organisms also absorb the toxins contained in these plastic items. These poisons then work their way up the food chain making seafood potentially dangerous for humans as well.

Governments under the Convention on Biological Diversity are addressing this, but more still needs to be done. Aichi Biodiversity Target 8, that pollution should be brought to levels not detrimental to ecosystem function and biodiversity, represents an important basis for action.

Furthermore, at the 2016 UN Biodiversity Conference<sup>2</sup> in Cancun, Mexico, Parties to the Convention also acknowledged voluntary practical guidance that would prevent and mitigate the impacts of marine debris on marine and coastal biodiversity and habitats. This included addressing ways to reduce the production and consumption of plastics.

We have all contributed to the problem of plastic pollution through our widespread use and poor disposal. For many years, we only perceived the benefits of plastic. We didn't realise the harmful consequences for human health, natural ecosystems and the climate.

But now that we are aware of the damaging effects of plastic, there are plenty of things that we as individual consumers can do.

We can refuse to use plastic straws, grocery bags, plastic utensils, plates and cups. Instead, we can buy reusable bags and reusable water bottles, and use dishes, glasses and metal silverware. We can also choose cosmetic and personal care products that do not contain microplastics – small beads that are not visible to the eye and not filtered out during sewage treatment.

Furthermore, we can participate in organized cleanups and pick up plastic trash wherever we see it, especially in ponds, streams rivers and beaches.

The solutions also extend to those who are involved in the production and distribution of plastics. There is a need for a life-cycle solution to plastics that looks at ways to reduce plastic use across our economy, to ensure proper disposal of used plastics, and identify ways to make plastics biodegradable or recyclable. The engagement of the business community, of manufacturers and of governments is essential.

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<sup>2</sup> Thirteenth meeting of the Conference of the Parties to the Convention on Biological Diversity; Eighth meeting of the Conference of the Parties serving as the meeting of the Parties to the Cartagena Protocol on Biosafety; Second meeting of the Conference of the Parties serving as the meeting of the Parties to the Nagoya Protocol on Access and Benefit-sharing; 4 - 17 December 2016, Cancun, Mexico.

Together we can solve this problem. Plastic pollution is one of the greatest challenges confronting us today. Let's all make a difference through our choices and our behaviour, and ensure that we can indeed live in harmony with nature for generations to come.

In the words of Jane Goodall, founder of the Jane Goodall Institute and a United Nations Messenger of Peace: "You cannot get through a single day without having an impact on the world around you. What you do makes a difference, and you have to decide what kind of difference you want to make."

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