

**PLASTIKI: A BOAT WITH A MESSAGE**

especially bags, look like food to many birds and marine species. Whales, sea turtles, dolphins and seals frequently die after eating plastic debris.

“We often find cigarette lighters, bucket handles, toothbrushes, syringes, toy soldiers – anything made out of plastic [inside birds],” said John Klavitter, a biologist studying the albatross population on Midway **atoll**, located halfway between North America and Japan.

BACK AT YA

Some scientists fear that plastic may even be poisoning the entire marine food chain. That’s because, over time, plastic doesn’t **biodegrade**. Instead, after years of sunlight and wave action, it breaks up into tiny pieces less than five millimetres across – about the width of a pea.

These tiny plastic pieces act like miniature sponges in the ocean, soaking up the many **toxic** chemicals that have found their way into the salt water. Eventually, small creatures eat many of them. Sometimes, these animals die as a result, but often, they are eaten by larger creatures, including fish. In turn, larger animals – humans among them – eat the fish and ingest the poisons.

“Farmers can grow pesticide-free **organic** produce, but can nature still produce a pollutant-free organic fish? After what I have seen firsthand in the Pacific, I have doubts,” commented the captain of a research vessel who spent years on the ocean.

WHAT CAN BE DONE?

Scientists say we can’t remove all the garbage currently floating in the oceans. There’s simply too much. Instead, the focus must be on keeping the problem from getting worse.

The key is for individuals, companies and governments to change the way they think about plastic.

“Plastic is useful but often not necessary,” said Kai Chan, a professor at the University of British Columbia. “The more disposable a product, the more of a problem it is from this aspect of plastic waste in the ocean.”

CHANGE IS POSSIBLE

The crew of the *Plastiki* has challenged people to stop using plastic altogether, but there are many ways to make a difference. Pack your lunch using reusable containers. Recycle as much as possible. Look for and buy the products that have the least packaging. And perhaps most important – bring your own reusable bags when you shop. According to **Ocean Conservancy**, over one million bags are used and discarded worldwide, every minute of every day.

“Our reliance on single-use packaging materials just doesn’t make sense. When you think about it, the life of that bag could be ten minutes between the time we leave the store and get home,” observed one environmentalist. ★

INTERNATIONAL COASTAL CLEAN-UP

On September 25, hundreds of thousands of volunteers from countries all over the world will be spending the day picking up trash from the world’s beaches and waterways as part of Ocean Conservancy’s annual international coastal clean-up.

Workers will record everything they collect – from cigarette butts, 55-gallon oil drums, plastic bags and shopping carts to household appliances – on data cards. Then, they will give the cards to researchers who will analyze the data so they can map out, item-by-item and location-by-location, the marine debris that was collected.

This information can be used to help stop plastic pollution at its source. Knowing that certain items show up more in certain places allows governments to plan better recycling services. It can also show corporations that they need to make changes because their products or packaging are contributing to the garbage problem. And it can inspire individuals to properly throw out their trash and keep it out of the ocean.

In the 2009 cleanup, 10,239,538 pieces of junk were retrieved from shorelines by about half a million volunteers. The top three items found worldwide? Cigarettes/cigarette filters, plastic bags and food wrappers/containers.

DEFINITIONS

ATOLL: island consisting of a circular coral reef surrounding a lagoon

BIODEGRADE: decompose by, for example, bacteria

OCEAN CONSERVANCY: an environmental nonprofit group formed in 1972 that promotes healthy and diverse ocean ecosystems and opposes practices that threaten ocean life and human life

ORGANIC: of or relating to foodstuff grown or raised without synthetic fertilizers, pesticides, or hormones

TOXIC: poisonous