

PLASTIC WASTE CRISIS ENGULFS PH, OTHER STATES

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The blanket of trash on a creek that flows between the makeshift homes of a Manila slum is so dense it appears one could walk across it like a paved street.



However, the thick and fetid mosaic of plastic bottles, takeaway containers and plastic bags is just a porous layer atop the filthy water of Estero de Magdalena.

It is one of the tributaries that run into Manila's most important and heavily polluted waterways, the Pasig River.

City officials blame the slum's residents for using the creek as an open-air dump and have installed massive strainers in the water that keep the trash from flowing downstream.

"We want to block it at that point so we can easily collect the garbage. We do not want it to flow into the Pasig River," Lorenzo Alconera, an official with the city engineering department, told Agence FrancePresse (AFP).

Swept into sea

Trash that makes it into the river can then be swept out into the South China Sea or be sucked back by tides into Laguna de Bay, the country's largest lake.

The city says it periodically uses heavy equipment to scoop the rubbish from the water and ends up with five to 10 truckloads of waste.

Plastic pollution is a major problem in the Philippines, which along with China, Vietnam, Thailand and Indonesia, is frequently listed among the world's worst offenders.

About 8 million tons of plastic waste are dumped into the world's oceans every year, the equivalent of one garbage truck of plastic being tipped into the sea every minute of every day, accord-

ing to a 2015 report by the environmental campaigner Ocean Conservancy.

Five Asian countries—China, Indonesia, Philippines, Thailand and Vietnam—account for up to 60 percent of the plastic waste leaking into the ocean, the study said.

Consumer demand

According to the study, the five economies have “generated exploding demand for consumer products,” but they lack the waste management infrastructure to cope with the surge in plastic garbage.

“We are in a plastic pollution crisis, we can see it everywhere in our rivers, in our oceans ... We need to do something about it,” Greenpeace Indonesia campaigner Ahmad Ashov Birry told AFP. World Environment Day on Tuesday highlighted the perils of plastic with the tagline “if you can’t reuse it, refuse it.” The United Nations called for the “biggest-ever worldwide cleanup” of plastic pollution.

But it is not just an issue of aesthetics, plastics are killing marine life.

Last week, a whale died in southern Thailand with 80 plastic bags in its stomach, an increasingly common sight alongside dead seabirds and turtles gorged on plastic and washed ashore.

Experts warn the greatest threat might be invisible.

Microplastics

Microplastics—tiny shards that easily soak up toxins after breaking off from larger plastic pieces—have been found in tap water, groundwater and inside fish that millions of people eat across Asia every day.

Scientists still do not fully understand the health effects of consuming microplastics.

Rubbish collection is low in rural Vietnam as elsewhere in Asia, one of the main reasons why so much plastic ends up in the sea, according to Joi Danielson, program director of Oceans Plastics Asia at SYSTEMIQ.

On average, only about 40 percent of garbage is properly collected in the five plastic-addled countries that spit out most of the ocean’s trash, with few resources dedicated to proper waste management, especially in mushrooming megacities.

At the current rate of dumping, the total amount of plastic trash in the world’s oceans is expected to double to 250 million tons by 2025, according to Ocean Conservancy.

That means there could be more plastic than fish in the world’s seas by 2050 if nothing is done to turn the tide.

China example

Environmentalists are looking to China to lead by example when it comes to tackling the problem.

The vast majority of China’s waste is homegrown and collection remains low in rural areas, according to Danielson.

Experts agree that while the problem seems daunting with plastic waste so ubiquitous throughout Asia, it is a crisis with a solution.

Social media campaigns calling for plastic bans have helped to spark public awareness.

Improved waste collection and reduced consumption have been flagged as crucial next steps.

Ocean Conservancy has also called for new plastic materials and product designs and more investment into waste-to-energy and waste-to-fuel schemes.

A “trash emergency” on the Indonesian island of Bali and the Philippines’ decision to close the tourist island of Boracay showed governments were recognizing the impact of plastic waste, said Susan Ruffo, Ocean Conservancy’s managing director for international initiatives.

“But this is not just a government responsibility—corporations, civil society and citizens all have a part to play,” Ruffo said.

Indonesia—ranked second behind China in the 2015 study of mismanaged plastic waste from populations living near coastal areas in 192 countries—has pledged \$1 billion a year to reduce marine plastic debris by 70 percent by 2025.