



The war on plastic and how corporate social responsibility can play its part



In 2018, global use of plastic and its effect on the environment is becoming a major topic of discussion.

We are producing almost 300 million tonnes of plastic every year, with half of that just for single use – the plastic bag, of which 500 billion are used worldwide annually, has an average working life of just 15 minutes⁽¹⁾. Plastic products are part of everyday life and their affordability and adaptability make them a valuable resource, but their strain on the environment is a growing concern. Worryingly, 8 million tonnes of plastic are now being dumped into the oceans annually.

This was dramatically underlined in a recent case of a sperm whale washing up on the beach in southern Spain with nearly 30kg of waste in its stomach⁽²⁾. The death of the mammal prompted authorities in Murcia to launch a swift clean-up of its beaches, but a more proactive approach is needed to inspire true environmental change. Fortunately, this year has seen renewed effort from the European Union to tackle sustainability issues.

In January, the EU announced plans for a war on plastic, vowing to make sure every piece of packaging across Europe is reusable or recyclable by 2030⁽³⁾. In its sights are items such as drinking straws, takeaway packaging, coffee cups and non-degradable bottles. Taxes on single use plastics are also potentially on the horizon in a bid to bring down usage.



Furthermore, the UK is similarly committed to clamping down on plastic despite its imminent exit from the EU. In January, Prime Minister Theresa May announced a 25-year environmental plan to get rid of avoidable plastic waste by the end of 2042⁽⁴⁾ Clearly, the time to act is now, and it's reassuring that talk is turning into action.

Frans Timmermans, vice-president of the European Commission, admitted that Brussels's major priority is to eliminate plastics that take five minutes to make but 500 years to break down. "If we don't do anything about this, 50 years down the road we will have more plastic than fish in the ocean," he said. "We have all seen the images, whether you watch Blue Planet, whether you watch the beaches in Asian countries after storms."

Timmermans added that education around plastics should take precedence, citing his own children as future consumers who can easily understand the difference between using non-recyclable plastic straws and papers ones⁽⁵⁾.

“

If we don't do anything about this, 50 years down the road we will have more plastic than fish in the ocean,”

In some cases, more urgent help is required to halt environmental degradation. Haiti, for instance, lacked any kind of recycling or waste disposal infrastructure even before the devastating earthquake of 2010.

Now the country's trash problems are worse than ever⁽⁶⁾. Plastic is routinely burned, releasing a foul smell and harmful toxins into the air. Then there's waste strewn across the streets that's washed onto the beaches and into the sea with every downpour.

Haiti's plastic problem goes beyond the environment: it's presenting health problems and leading to a lack of foreign investment. Plus, the sight of streets full of waste is hardly going to be a boon for tourism.



Of course, government and individuals can't always make giant strides forward alone.

It takes effort from businesses, particularly large corporations, to promote positive social and environmental change. HP, in partnership with Thread International and the First Mile Coalition⁽⁷⁾, is one such business embracing corporate social responsibility. In June 2017, the technology company announced the launch of Original HP ink cartridges made with plastic recycled in Haiti. HP buys recycled plastic collected in Haiti, providing income for locals and creating sustainable ink cartridges. Haiti is now a valuable starting point in the supply chain, while also helping prevent plastic from reaching the Caribbean Sea.

“HP has been committed to sourcing materials responsibly and treating all workers with respect for decades,” said Stuart Pann, HP’s Chief Supply Chain Officer. “Our work in Haiti enables us to reach the vulnerable collectors in Haiti and make their plastic part of our supply chain – which creates economic opportunities and a better quality of life for these families.”

Rosette Altidor, a Haitian collection centre owner, explained that the programme has given her an income to support her family. “The work that [Thread and] HP are doing helps me get my children to school, and helps me pay for my home,” she said. “It motivates me to motivate others to collect plastic as well. Everyone can benefit from clean-up work in Haiti.”

HP’s commitment to Haiti is complemented by its Planet Partners programme, a scheme allowing customers to return and recycle HP ink cartridges, HP LaserJet toner cartridges and Samsung toner cartridges. The war on plastic will undoubtedly be a long and hard-fought campaign, but if more big businesses follow HP’s example, there’s hope in sight.

“

It motivates me to motivate others to collect plastic as well. Everyone can benefit from clean-up work in Haiti.”





LINKS:

(1) The Facts are Overwhelming, Plastic Oceans, current:

<https://plasticoceans.org/the-facts/>

(2) Sperm whale that washed up on beach, CNN, April 2018:

<https://edition.cnn.com/2018/04/11/health/sperm-whale-plastic-waste-trnd/index.html>

(3) A European strategy for plastics in a circular economy, European Commission, January 2018:

https://ec.europa.eu/commission/sites/beta-political/files/plastics-factsheet-challenges-opportunities_en.pdf

(4) 25 Year Environment Plan, Gov.UK, January 2018: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/25-year-environment-plan>

(5) EU declares war on plastic waste, The Guardian, January 2018:

<https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2018/jan/16/eu-declares-war-on-plastic-waste-2030>

(6) Haitian capital seeks solutions to insufficient solid waste disposal, Global Press Journal, June 2018:

<https://globalpressjournal.com/americas/haiti/haitian-capital-seeks-solutions-insufficient-solid-waste-disposal/>

(7) HP used eight million “ocean bound” plastic bottles in products last year, Edie, June 2018:

<https://www.edie.net/news/7/HP-diverts-170-tonnes-of-plastic-from-oceans-with-closed-loop-cartridges/>

c06407943, July 2019