



PLASTIC FREE OCEANS



THE ISSUE

Hong Kong is home to a broad diversity of coastal habitats, with around 6,000 marine species having been recorded in our waters. Unfortunately, our incredibly rich marine environment is presently under threat from marine litter. With plastic waste continuing to enter the ocean at a rate equivalent to one dump truck per minute, our challenge is urgent. Once in the ocean, plastics form a significant, persistent and almost irreversible threat to marine wildlife and human health. It is estimated that eight million tonnes of plastic debris enters the ocean every year. The Hong Kong government collects 15,000 tonnes of marine litter every year, equivalent to filling 3,750 garbage trucks, but large amounts of it remains uncollected in remote areas.

WHAT WE ARE DOING

WWF aims to tackle the root of plastic pollution. Together with our partners we are developing innovative approaches that move beyond the approach of clean-ups alone, which enable global awareness of the issue, but do not stop leakage. By 2030, WWF aims to play a complementary role in eliminating plastic pollution.

WWF-Hong Kong has a long track record in fighting marine litter. Together with partners, Coastal Cleanup was set up in 2014. One of the key activities is the citizen science project in which over 2,000 volunteers have collected data on 34 sites to perform citizen science to classify, collect, and monitor marine litter. The results showed that plastic debris makes up around 60-80% of marine litter found along our shorelines, on the sea surface, and on the seabed. The predominant types of plastic litter collected were single-use disposable items, like packaging, polystyrene food boxes and cups, bottles, shopping bags, and large polystyrene containers from the fisheries and seafood industries.

The enormous amount of litter at our beaches and coastlines, threatens marine species and ecosystems, as well as fisheries. Toxins enter the food chain and eventually impact human health. Abandoned fishing nets (also known as ghost nets) entangle marine life causing injury and death. Clean-up costs are a financial burden to society.

Source reduction is one important process that involves identifying the origin of litter to stop it from entering our waters. The origin of the majority of plastic litter is domestic and recreational waste, pointing to unsustainable, disposable lifestyles. We must also look to our neighbour mainland China and form cross-border partnerships if we are to comprehensively tackle this problem and find workable solutions through legislation to manage the production, usage and disposal of plastic products, developing a circular economy to prevent waste disposal, encouraging technological innovation and industrial transformation, and supporting extended producer responsibility. Some progress has been made with the Mainland government to step up enforcement against pollution sources, with NGOs promoting waste management in rural villages, and corporations developing alternative materials to replace plastic.

WWF is actively partnering with communities and the industries to tackle the problem. WWF has engaged communities across Hong Kong to evaluate their local litter problem and brainstorm solutions. The marine recreation sector has also been engaged to help in changing sector operations to reduce waste, encourage recycling, and help raise awareness on marine litter and our disposable culture. More than 30 groups joined the ECF Sea Without Litter program, and several diving boats and junks switched to reusable tableware and water dispensers.

Underwater ghost nets (abandoned nets) are another issue of concern, as they present a long-lasting threat to marine ecosystems and to fisheries. We are currently assessing the distribution and quantity of ghost nets to formulate a solid strategic plan to remove this abandoned fishing gear. Approaches include training experienced divers to remove them from ecologically-sensitive areas, implementation of licensing and tagging of nets, and strengthening the reporting mechanism to regulate the disposal and recovery of nets. In 2018, WWF and local fishermen collected 40kg of fishing nets for upcycling into fashion accessories with a local design company. Collaboration with the fishing industry to understand the proper disposal of fishing nets, with incentives to encourage the recycling of worn fishing nets is a useful step forward. The fishery and seafood industries have been engaged to examine the possibility of changing commonly used polystyrene fish boxes to alternative boxes that are more sustainable, along with a collection, reuse and recycling mechanism in order to minimize the number of fish boxes entering the ocean in the future.

OUR ASK

The problem of marine litter has been a persistent environmental issue in Hong Kong for decades that is worsening every year. WWF-Hong Kong recommends the government to implement the below strategies:

- Ban all polystyrene tableware by 2022;
- Provide a clear timeline on phasing out all single-use plastic tableware upon completion of the government's consultancy study in 2021;
- Establish an aid fund for the food and beverage industry to roll out incentive schemes for customers to bring their own cutlery and container;
- Implement the Pilot Scheme on Collection and Recycling Services of Plastic Recyclable Materials in Sai Kung and Central piers; and,
- Develop a regulated Extended Producer Responsibility (EPR) system for plastic packaging and tableware in the supermarket and food and beverage industries.