



IT'S TIME WE WOKE UP TO THE PLASTIC CRISIS IN OUR OCEANS

By Richard Asher

It's the middle of a *Top Gear* episode, and Jeremy Clarkson's giving some seven-figure supercar a shakedown. He is not impressed. The world's favourite motoring journalist gives the dashboard a solid bang with the palm of his hand. 'Plastic!'

He spits out the word with passionate distaste. Plastic, on a car this expensive? Inexcusable.

But although class and plastic may never go together, Clarkson would have to admit that as a species we love the stuff. How we managed before men like Alexander Parkes (he of Parkesine) and Leo Baekeland (he of Bakelite) started their synthesising trickery, I'm not sure.

Our dependence on this cheap and durable but essentially non-biodegradable material, which could slowly be poisoning both its happy users and the oceans, is staggering. Poker chips have a strong case to answer for. And is there any excuse for disposable razors? And don't get me started on silly, impenetrable packaging and the damage it's done to my canines.

Plastic isn't very agreeable when it comes to fully breaking down, which means it hangs around indefinitely and recycling potential is very limited. Much of it ends up in the ocean (20% of it is from ships and harbours though, the rest is litter that's blown in), where currents draw it into seething masses known as 'gyres' such as the one environmentalists are calling the 'Great Pacific Garbage

Patch' in the North Pacific. This scary thing is starting to get plenty of media coverage, and rightly so. Although this collection of pelagic plastic isn't the visible monstrosity some claim it is – 70% of the plastic sinks to the bottom, the remaining 30% floats in the top 20m – most sources agree it's at least the size of South Africa. There are five gyres like this in our oceans, and at the moment this one is the worst.

Such messes are more than just a dirty thought. In 2006 the UN Environment Programme estimated that, at the time, there were 46 000 pieces of plastic per square mile in the oceans. Millions of seabirds and hundreds of thousands of fish and mammals die because of plastic ingestion every year. Don't be surprised to find a plastic pipe inside the next dorado you catch. And as plastic breaks down into tiny particles about two millimetres in size, called 'nurdles', it infiltrates the food chain even more, bringing new toxins into the mix. These toxins can find their way into our seafood dishes – have you ever noticed that you don't see the words 'organic' and 'fish' together too often?

Chillingly, the environmental and economic impact of trying to do an ocean clean-up apparently makes it a no-go. The Environmental Cleanup Coalition ([www.gyrecleanup.org](http://www.gyrecleanup.org)) is dedicated to the idea, but at the moment doesn't seem to have a practical POA. Still, raising awareness is good, and they're not the only guys doing it. There's a boat called

*Plastiki* touring the globe this year, made from 12 500 plastic bottles.

'Our appetite for one-time-use plastics is now hurtling back towards us as an ever-growing and devastating set of plastic fingerprints on our natural world,' say the *Plastiki* crew. 'It doesn't have to be this way!'

We'd better take that to heart. If marine clean-up is a tricky business and we're doing ourselves (forget the fish for a minute) long-term harm, then producing less of the stuff would be a cunning plan. But that's where we get so stupid that you wonder how we ever invented such things.

If only we were more civilised and less tuggish. I remember going to a cricket match where, after the day's play, the sozzled fans had made a large-scale map of Australia with empty plastic beer cups. If people could get through the afternoon without hacking each other to bits with glass, there'd be no need for such things.

And when they deliver your fast food in parts of South Korea, you get a real plate and cutlery, which they fetch later from your doorstep. Impressive plastic policy, but it wouldn't work in most countries. There's that need for decency again.

The biggest irony is that the ocean has its own natural plastic anyway. Inside certain types of squid you'll find a ready-made coffee stirrer. I'm not saying we should be making boats (or even dashboards) out of it, but it certainly is time for some broader thinking... ●