

Fact Sheet:

Common Misconceptions About Trash and Recycling



Where does ocean plastic come from?

Asia, by and large. [One study](#) found that, of plastic debris entering the ocean, 10 rivers account for almost all of the plastic. Eight are in Asia. The other two are in Africa.

[An earlier 2015 study](#) confirms that the vast majority of ocean plastic waste comes from Asia. The US is responsible for only about 1 percent of plastic entering the oceans every year. A newer analysis claims this number is a little higher for the U.S., but this calculation includes plastic that is mismanaged by other countries that take in the waste from the US.

What makes up ocean plastic?

[National Geographic reports](#) that the majority of plastic in the Great Pacific Garbage Patch is abandoned fishing gear--not single use consumer products like bags or straws.

Is trash on our beaches from America?

Ocean currents (called gyres) can sweep trash thousands of miles from one location to another. A study from Hawaiian Pacific University found trash that floated as far as 3,000 miles [from Asia to Hawaii](#). A recent study found that 97-98% of waste in the US is properly managed. Oftentimes, we're cleaning up other countries' problems.

What about those compelling pictures of trash in the water?

Make sure those pictures are accurate. A recent report from the environmental group Oceana purported to show photos of the harm of plastic in U.S. waters. But many photos were [actually photos taken in other countries](#) halfway around the world.

Is biodegradable plastic a good alternative to regular plastic?

"Biodegradable" sounds good, but according to The New York Times, biodegradable plastic still [takes years to decompose](#). It might be biodegradable in pristine, controlled laboratory conditions, but nature is different. [A study](#) published this year finds that "cases of false claims of biodegradability in plastic products are becoming frequent."

What is the recycling rate for plastic?

The EPA states the recycling rate for plastic overall is [about 8 percent](#). But this lumps together hard-to-recycle plastics with easy-to-recycle #1 and #2 plastics, which make up beverage bottles and household containers. In contrast, polystyrene products (like Styrofoam) are difficult to recycle and are commonly put in a landfill.

According to the EPA, the recycling rate of #1 and #2 containers is [about 27 and 29 percent](#), respectively, which is close to the national average across all materials, which is 32 percent.

Is plastic the biggest problem?

[Research](#) by a zero waste advocacy group has determined that food waste contributes more to climate change than plastic waste. Plastic's physical properties, including its light weight, help reduce carbon emissions in production and transportation compared to other materials like glass, which are heavier. The EPA finds that food is the single biggest category of solid waste in the U.S. Rotting food produces methane, a potent greenhouse gas.

