

PLANET OR PLASTIC?

A whopping 91% of plastic isn't recycled

Billions of tons of plastic have been made over the past decades, and much of it is becoming trash and litter, finds the first analysis of the issue.

BY LAURA PARKER

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[<http://news.nationalgeographic.com/news/2015/02/150212-ocean-debris-plastic-garbage-patches-science/>] . That is the equivalent to five grocery bags of plastic trash for every foot of coastline around the globe.

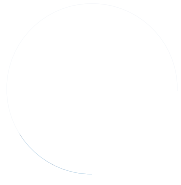
“We weren’t aware of the implications for plastic ending up in our environment until it was already there,” Jambeck says. “Now we have a situation where we have to come from behind to catch up.”

Gaining control of plastic waste is now such a large task that it calls for a comprehensive, global approach, Jambeck says, that involves rethinking plastic chemistry, product design, recycling strategies, and consumer use. The United States ranks behind Europe (30 percent) and China (25 percent) in recycling, the study found. Recycling in the U.S. has remained at nine percent since 2012.

“We as a society need to consider whether it’s worth trading off some convenience for a clean, healthy environment,” Geyer says. “For some products that are very problematic in the environment, maybe we think about using different materials. Or phasing them out.”

This story was first published on July 19, 2017 and updated on December 20, 2018 with the news of the Royal Statistical Society's recognition.

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Laura Parker is a staff writer who specializes in covering climate change and marine environments.

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