

Asia, Africa Cause 90% of Plastic Pollution in World's Oceans



By Alex Berezow, PhD — July 26, 2018



Credit: Storyblocks [1]

Do you use plastic bags? Do you drink from plastic straws? You're a contemptible person who should be [fined and imprisoned](#) [2] because you're polluting the ocean and destroying the planet.

The inconvenient fact, of course, is that none of it's true. Plastic bag and straw bans -- examples of what Todd Myers calls "[eco-fads](#) [3]" (things that make us feel good but do nothing beneficial) -- will do nothing to curb plastic pollution in the ocean. Actual data explain why.

#1. Plastic doesn't magically appear in the ocean. It has to arrive there. How does it do that? One way is through carelessness, such as littering. Litter can end up in storm drains, then washed out to sea. But if you're a responsible adult, and you put garbage in a trash can and recyclables in a recycling bin, everything will be okay. So, how does so much plastic get in the ocean?

#2. You aren't the problem. Asia is. Some of the nastiest, most polluted rivers in the world are in China and India. One [study](#) [4], published in October 2017 in the journal *Environmental Science & Technology*, estimated that 88 to 95% of plastic pollution in the oceans came from [just 10 rivers](#) [5]. Eight of them were in Asia, and the other two were in Africa.

Why are these countries such big polluters? Well, they're poor. They don't have good infrastructure for dealing with waste. As countries become wealthier, they are better able to clean up their messes. This is a phenomenon known as the [environmental Kuznets curve](#) [6]. Instead of banning plastic straws, we should be focusing our efforts on helping developing countries become wealthier and healthier.

#3. Consumer plastics probably aren't the biggest problem. While a picture of a sea turtle with

a straws in its nose is sad, photographs aren't necessarily representative of reality. Think of them as digital anecdotes. When surveys of ocean pollution are conducted, what researchers find is not plastic straws or bags but [fishing gear](#) [7]. Lots and lots of fishing gear.

The Conclusion

The data are fully convincing: The developing world -- not America or Europe -- plays, by far, the largest role in polluting our oceans with plastic. If we want this pollution to stop, then we might want to consider helping them modernize their infrastructure. Finally, we should consider policies that punish commercial fishermen who leave nets and other gear in the water.

True, these policies are boring and spiritually unfulfilling. But the upshot is that they would probably work.

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[3] <https://www.amazon.com/Eco-Fads-trendy-environmentalism-harming-environment-ebook/dp/B005KLRRSM>

[4] <https://pubs.acs.org/doi/10.1021/acs.est.7b02368>

[5] <https://www.dw.com/en/almost-all-plastic-in-the-ocean-comes-from-just-10-rivers/a-41581484>

[6] <https://www.intelligenteconomist.com/environmental-kuznets-curve/>

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