

Tackling plastic waste in the oceans

David Attenborough's Blue Planet II has done much to focus public attention on the birds, sea mammals and turtles which die every year from eating and getting tangled in plastic waste. I have received numerous emails about it so will share here my reply to the campaign email.

More than eight million tonnes of plastic enter the world's seas each year. For sea birds and larger marine creatures, the danger comes from being entangled in plastic bags and other debris, or mistaking plastic for food. Larger pieces of plastic can also damage the digestive system of animals and can be potentially fatal.

In the UK alone, during its recent Great British Beach Clean Up, the Marine Conservation Society found 718 pieces of litter for every 100 metre stretch of beach surveyed, and of this rubbish from food and drink made up at least one fifth.

If I buy a food product in plastic packaging because it is a fluid which needs containment it does not end up in the oceans. I dispose of it through the local Council who get it recycled, or burned for energy from waste, or dumped to landfill. The plastic in the oceans comes from people deliberately discarding plastic waste as litter.

The Government recognises the danger that plastic waste poses to marine life and has taken significant steps to tackle this by seeking to reduce the amount of plastic packaging people might be able to throw away carelessly. It has introduced a ban on plastic microbeads and taken 9 billion plastic bags out of circulation with the carrier-bag charge. It realises that more needs to be done to protect our environment from the blight of plastic pollution and it has recently launched a consultation around deposit reward and return schemes for plastic bottles and other drinks containers. The Government also plans to ban the sale of plastic straws, stirrers and plastic-stemmed cotton buds.

Responding to the public mood, seven major supermarket chains have announced they will make drastic reductions in plastic use over the next five years. Much current plastic packaging would be replaced with paper and pulp trays and paper bags, which would be recyclable through domestic waste collections or in-store recycling facilities. It can only be a matter of time before other supermarket chains follow suit.

The Government recognises that tackling the use of plastic cannot be done in isolation. It is directing some of its development spending to help developing nations reduce plastic waste, increasing our own marine protected areas at home, and establishing new Blue Belt protections in our Overseas Territories.

We need to stress it is not just the responsibility of the Government to care for the environment. We must all do our part by using the litter bins, taking

our own reusable bags to the shops and reducing the use of throwaway plastic items.

The challenge is to stop people on boats treating the seas as their waste bin and to stop people on land throwing plastic away where it can be caught by the wind or a river and sent to the ocean. We also wish to stop people littering the countryside, so waste does not reach the oceans or pollute areas where wildlife lives.

It is up to all of us to encourage and persuade our friends and family to avoid littering and to report or discourage others we see who are throwing litter away carelessly. We also have to work internationally on the problem as most of the litter in the oceans does not come from the UK.

Parliament must play its part to contribute towards reducing plastic waste. Parliament recently announced a comprehensive range of steps to drastically reduce its consumption of single-use plastics this year by switching non-recyclable disposal items such as take-away boxes, cups and soup containers to sustainably sourced, plant-based and certified compostable alternatives. Bottled water in plastic bottles will also no longer be on sale in Parliament, eliminating 120,000 plastic bottles annually.

What do you think we should all do to curb the plastic threat to the seas?