

# Drowning in plastic

DH [deccanherald.com/opinion/drowning-in-plastic-1073675.html](https://deccanherald.com/opinion/drowning-in-plastic-1073675.html)

January 23, 2022



Harini Nagendra,

- JAN 23 2022, 00:09 IST
- UPDATED: JAN 23 2022, 12:26 IST



Representative Image. Credit: Reuters File Photo

We move further into 2022 with the hope that the past two years of pandemic devastation are slowly giving way to global economic recovery. But while the stock markets may be up, it is also increasingly clear that we are in the middle of a global environmental crisis. The United Nations Environmental Programme (UNEP) defines this as a ‘triple planetary crisis’. Humanity’s future is under threat because of climate change, biodiversity loss, and pollution. Unsustainable economic production of goods, and unsustainable, unbridled consumption – in other words, our casual “use-and-throw” culture – are the main cause for this triple planetary crisis, as the UNEP reminds us.

Plastics lie at the heart of this debate. The Environmental Investigation Agency, an independent international NGO, estimates that by 2040, there will be more plastic in the oceans than fish. Hundreds of studies from across the world tell us that microscopic particles of plastic are now everywhere. In our soil, food, water, in the air we breathe – and, inevitably, embedded in our bodies.

The renowned naturalist and filmmaker David Attenborough brought the plastic crisis to global attention in 2017, with his award-winning documentary series. The Blue Planet II showed viewers the direct effects of plastic pollution on the ocean through heart-rending visuals, such as that of a family of whales in mourning after a calf was poisoned by plastic-contaminated milk. The BBC, which produced the documentary, was so moved that it committed to phasing out all single-use plastics by 2020. The European Union also mandated that all plastic bottle manufacturers should use at least 25% recycled plastic by 2025. But that has been harder to do than imagined. Lacking a well-designed process to collect and reuse plastics, most plastic continues to land up in landfills and water bodies.

The plastic industry has now become the mainstay of large multinational oil and natural gas industries. Impacted by the global shift towards renewable energy, plastic production has become a key part of their strategies for future survival and growth. By 2030, a 'Beyond Plastics' report estimates that plastic production will contribute more to climate change in the US than emissions from coal!

As consumers, we are exhorted daily to be 'sustainable' by carrying our own coffee mugs and glasses, taking cloth bags to the vegetable market, and staying away from bottled water. Indeed, we should do all of these things. But consumers have little influence in a world where more than 40% of all the plastic manufactured in the world is used for single-use plastic products such as "paper" cups (which are in reality coated in plastic), or shampoo sachets, which are difficult to avoid in rural or low-income areas where people may not have the money to buy an entire bottle at a time.

The triple planetary crisis is a crisis of climate, biodiversity, and pollution. Plastic single-handedly emerges as one of the largest contributors to global warming, species collapse, and pollution. Unless we turn our attention towards plastic, we will not be able to move forward to a healthier decade.

By July this year, India will join a number of countries across the world that are phasing out short-term plastic use, by banning most types of single-use plastic, including single-use food packaging, plastic bags, straws and plastic cups. But without a proper plan for what will replace these, and without enforcement, such plans face the danger of remaining on paper. Currently, only about 60% of the plastic produced in India is collected, largely by informal waste-pickers. Much of this is low-value and cannot be recycled, ending back in landfills.

Yet, we need to solve this challenge, before it gets worse. Consumer action is one way – but consumer pressure is a far more effective way. We need public campaigns, public documentaries like Blue Planet II, and public anger – to compel industries to act. Can we?