

EU has central role in tackling 'harmful marine litter'

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News

Lex Oosterbaan calls for more to be done to tackle 'devastating effects' of marine litter in the world's seas and oceans.



In Cascais, Portugal on 27 June 2014, the Ospar commission formally adopted its regional action plan on marine litter. The plan will enable countries to substantially reduce marine litter in the north-east Atlantic, by implementing collective actions, and addressing litter from both land and sea-based sources, which will result in a reduction in marine litter on coasts and beaches.

None of our waste belongs in the ocean, yet it continues to make its way to the most remote ocean places and can remain there for generations. This marine litter has devastating effects upon the marine habitats and species that Ospar is working hard to protect, as well as causing a wide spectrum of environmental, economic, health and cultural impacts.

It is broadly documented that entanglement in, or ingestion of, marine litter can negatively impact the condition of marine animals and even lead to death. Ingestion of micro plastics is also of particular concern as it may provide a pathway bringing harmful chemicals into the food chain.

Marine litter is also known to damage and degrade habitats and can increase the risk of the invasion by alien marine species. What is more, if not collected, it can build up along shores creating an eyesore, ruining the public's enjoyment of coasts and beaches. For example, our 2010 study found that on average there was 712 items per 100 metres stretch of beach.

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While marine litter can consist of such materials as plastic, metal, wood, rubber, glass and paper, plastic litter is by far the most abundant type. In some locations in the Oskar region, plastics amount to 90 per cent of marine litter on shorelines. Plastics are also predominant in samples at the sea surface and on the sea bed. These plastics degrade very slowly, if at all, so the reality of a continuous input of large quantities of these items means there will be a build-up in the marine and coastal environment.

As marine litter comes from materials lost at sea and on land, reduction and prevention must happen in a wide range of locations. This challenge is compounded because the litter may originate from many different sources, including shipping, fishing vessels, offshore oil and gas platforms, aquaculture, municipal landfills, tourism and sewage or industrial facilities.

A wide range of marine litter-related instruments and actions already exist. Nationally, a number of EU member states and Oskar countries have taken comprehensive action to address the marine litter issue through legislation, providing reception facilities for ship-generated wastes, improving their waste management practices and through support for beach-cleaning, as well as information, education and public awareness programmes.

But despite these efforts, there is no clear indication that the quantities and distribution of marine litter are decreasing, therefore more needs to be done. Our dynamic oceans coupled with the diverse sources of marine litter create a problem that straddles boundaries and requires collective action to solve. In 2010, Oskar ministers noted that quantities of litter in many areas of the north-east Atlantic were unacceptable and committed to continue to develop reduction targets and measures.

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The plan adopted in Cascais provides a regional contribution to the European Union's marine strategy framework directive and supports the global effort to achieve significant reductions in marine debris by 2025 as agreed by heads of state and governments at Rio+20.

In agreeing the plan, Oskar invited the strong participation of the EU, other international organisations, the private sector and non-governmental organisations to work with it in implementing the plan, recognising their essential role to achieve success in this tackling this huge challenge to the marine environment.

About the author

Lex Oosterbaan is chair of Oskar's environmental impact of human activities committee and co-lead for Oskar's marine litter correspondence group

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