

Keeping our seas plastic-free

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Opinion

Fish or plastic, that's the key question surrounding a new awareness-raising initiative, explains Maria Spyraiki.



Photo Credit: European Parliament Audiovisual

The news of a 47-year-old bottle washed ashore on a British beach paints a dark picture of the looming threat of marine litter in our seas.

For decades, the sea has been the last bastion of a sustainable and self-cleansing ecosystem, one that would wash away all our environmental sins and that we had to do little to preserve. Yet, as the middle-aged bottle shows, sadly, this is far from true.

The World Economic Forum claims that there are over 150 million tonnes of plastic in the oceans today. If nothing changes, the prediction is that by 2025 the oceans will contain one tonne of plastic

for every three of fish; by 2050 there will be more plastic than fish.

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Although the European Union is not a major polluter of our seas - 80 percent of marine litter originates from non-EU countries - we must be the driving force for change.

Given that ten specific single-use plastics accounted for 70 percent of marine litter in Europe, the Commission came forward with a proposal to reduce their impact on the environment. I was the EPP rapporteur on the ITRE committee opinion on this proposal; this led me to believe that a holistic solution must rely on three axes.

First is to create a paradigm shift in consumer behaviour on single-use plastics. We must raise awareness among end users of single-use plastic products of the impact the current model of consumption has on our environment.

This should include extensive communication campaigns, along with proper labelling of certain products detailing their proper disposal process as well as their negative impact on the environment. This is why I have already launched a campaign named “Fish or Plastic”, in order to raise awareness on the single-use plastics initiative, particularly in schools.

“We must push towards a circular economy, or more specifically push for funding directed at the ‘circular transformation’ of industry in research and development of new products and the emergence of new business models”

At the launch of the campaign, my colleagues Henna Virkkunen and Sofia Ribeiro engaged with the initiative, with Vice President Katainen actively supporting the campaign. As a follow-up, I organised a clean-up initiative on the small Greek island of Ammouliani, to raise awareness among all stakeholders, particularly the younger generation.

In addition, we wanted to deliver the message that, as a Greek proverb says, “it is not enough to pray to the Gods for a solution”, we must also move our hands. With marine litter, this applies to both the hand that litters, as well as the one that can collect it.

The commission’s proposal regarding plastics, particularly on reducing single-use plastics, provides a good base. This should be a driving force regarding tackling climate change; where necessary improving it to strike an appropriate balance between environmental sustainability and economic growth.

Secondly, we must push towards a circular economy, or more specifically, push for funding directed at

the “circular transformation” of industry in research and development of new products and the emergence of new business models.

Business must not ignore the future, preparing themselves to meet the demands of new markets and move away from non-sustainable models. The industry must also become part of the solution for reducing the negative consequences of the current consumer model.

This is why Extended Produced Responsibility schemes, which encourage producers to design environmentally-friendly products by sharing the cost of management of their products through their lifecycle, are important.

Third, as the protection of the environment is a shared goal, we need greater involvement by local and regional authorities. Environmental sustainability is better achieved using a bottom-up, rather than top-down approach. Engaging local communities under the lead of local and regional authorities is crucial; this can be best achieved by improving the knowledge, and therefore the capacity, of administrations to better grasp the concept of the circular economy and increase the recycling rates of municipal waste accordingly.

An interesting joint initiative of the Commission and the European Economic and Social Committee is the Circular Economy Stakeholder Platform - this acts as a hub for exchanging knowledge and best practice among stakeholders in implementing circular economy initiatives and strategies.

Marine litter is a challenge we should not avoid. We must act with both decisiveness to change and strategic foresight. We need changes in the consumption, production and administration models to achieve a holistic solution for a global problem.

As President Macron said, “On climate change, there is no plan B as there is no planet B.”

About the author

Maria Spyraiki is a co-campaigner on the ‘Fish or Plastic, avoiding single-use plastics on European Islands’ campaign

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