

Who is responsible for the plastic soup in the ocean?



By:

Kathryn Sheridan
CEO & Founder,
Sustainability Consult
Brussels, Belgium



My family lives in Spain and winter beach walks are one of our favourite activities. But I'm not really fun to go on a beach walk with as I see every walk as an opportunity to do some beach clean-up. It's more bobbing up and down to collect plastic bottles, bottle caps and fragments than actual walking.



Like many people, I am horrified by the amount of plastic and other waste that ends up on the beach. Some of it is left by careless people who had a picnic, a beer or an ice cream on the beach and tossed the wrappers. Cigarette butts are another real plague on Europe's beaches. Other bits come onto the beach from the sea, plastic bottles whittled down to fragments by the tide and the rocks. Torn garbage bags, overturned wheelie bins and overflowing public bins all seem to contribute to waste getting onto the beach and into the sea.

Marine litter is a plastics problem but it's also an infrastructure problem. Plastics should not be getting into the ocean. While I've spent much of my career advocating for bioplastics as a way to leave oil in the ground, I don't believe that today's bioplastics are the Holy Grail to solving plastic pollution in the ocean.

There is an assumption with the public which is repeated in the mainstream media that 'bioplastic' means 'marine degradable'. This isn't true. While marine degradable bioplastics like PHA are gaining traction, the reality is that most bioplastics on the market today are going to perform very similarly to petroleum-based plastics if they end up in the marine environment. For 'flyaway' applications like fishing nets, mulch films and greenhouses, we need a wholesale shift to biodegradable and marine degradable solutions.

The European Parliament estimates that 4.8 to 12.7 million tonnes of plastic go into the ocean every year (cf p. **). According to European Commission figures, 82% of marine litter is plastics. Of this, 27% comes from fishing gear and 49% from single-use plastics. So who is responsible for this floating mess?

I don't see much responsibility being taken. What I see is a lot of blame flying around. Many industry people are quick to blame consumers. Consumers blame industry. Everyone loves to blame politicians yet very few people seem to blame poor infrastructure in some developing countries for clogging up major rivers that lead to the sea. Pointing the finger and blaming doesn't help us make change. We need to find ways to share responsibility. The plastics industry, including the bioplastics sector, should contribute to clean-up and prevention.

Extended Producer Responsibility is an important principle in European legislation. I like to think of as Extended Producer Responsibility as the dog owner who picks up after other people's dogs. This prevents all dog owners from getting a bad name and means that no-one will think that you are the irresponsible dog owner leaving mess on the street.

We need to take our share of the responsibility in the plastics industry and find ways to step up and solve the problem.