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## Trash in world's oceans threatens wildlife, economy and human health, UN warns



Marine debris has far-reaching effects on habitats, biodiversity, human health and the global economy

25 March 2011 – With vast amounts of marine litter posing multiple threats, from harming wildlife to damaging tourism to loading the human food chain with potentially cancer-causing toxins, a United Nations conference today [issued](#) a call for concerted action against an evil present in all the world's seas.

In a commitment statement issued at the end of week-long meeting in Honolulu, Hawaii, experts from governments, research bodies, businesses and trade associations stressed the urgent need to improve global waste management, voicing concern at the growing presence of plastic debris among other rubbish discarded into the oceans, on shore, or brought indirectly to the sea by rivers, sewage, storm water or winds.

“Marine debris – trash in our oceans – is a symptom of our throw-away society and our approach to how we use our natural resources,” said UN Environment Programme ([UNEP](#)) Executive Director Achim Steiner, whose agency organized the meeting in cooperation with the United States National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA).

“It affects every country and every ocean, and shows us in highly visible terms the urgency of shifting towards a low carbon, resource efficient Green Economy,” he added in a message to conference delegates, who included experts from some 35 countries, governments, scientific bodies, corporations such as Coca-Cola Company and trade associations such as Plastics Europe.

“One community or one country acting in isolation will not be the answer. We need to address marine debris collectively across national boundaries and with the private sector, which has a critical role to play both in reducing the kinds of wastes that can end up in the world's oceans, and through research into new materials. It is by bringing all these players together that we can truly make a difference.”

The [Honolulu Commitment](#) issued at the end of the meeting, the 5th International Marine Debris Conference, calls on “international organizations, governments at national and sub-national levels, industry, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), citizens and other stakeholders” to halt and reverse the occurrence of marine debris by minimizing waste and turning it into a resource in an environmentally sustainable manner.

Citing the harmful impact of marine debris, UNEP said some 270 species worldwide are affected by entanglement in or ingestion of the trash marine, including 86 per cent of all sea turtles species, 44 per cent of all seabird species and 43 per cent of all marine mammal species.

“There is growing concern over the potential impact on human health of toxic substances released by plastic waste in the ocean,” it added, noting that scientists are studying whether contaminants linked to cancer, reproductive problems and other health risks can enter the food chain when ingested by marine animals.

Moreover, accumulated debris on beaches and shorelines can have a serious economic impact on communities that are dependent on tourism, while the debris may house invasive species that can disrupt marine habitats and ecosystems. Heavy items of marine debris can also damage habitats such as coral reefs and affect the foraging and feeding habits of marine animals.

Waste management is one of 10 economic sectors highlighted in UNEP’s Green Economy Report launched last month, highlighting enormous opportunities for turning land-based waste, the major contributor to marine debris, into a more economically valuable resource.

The value of the waste-to-energy market, for example, was estimated at \$20 billion in 2008 and is projected to grow by 30 per cent by 2014.

In a major [report](#) issued two years ago – *Marine Litter: A Global Challenge* – UNEP details the human actions, accidental or intentional, that are the sources of marine litter. Ocean-based sources include merchant shipping, cruise liners, fishing vessels and military as well as offshore oil and gas platforms and drilling rigs, and aquaculture.

On land, the culprits include beaches, piers, harbours, marinas, docks and riverbanks, and municipal landfills located on the coast, as well as rivers, lakes and ponds that are used as illegal dump sites, discharges of untreated municipal sewage and storm water, industrial facilities, and medical waste.

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