Project Change

Making Waves to Protect our Oceans

By Katya Gait

Photography Statement

Project Change is a series of images shot in the style of commercial still lifes. Its overall aim is to uncover the reality of global consumerism within a disposable society, and how this can affect our environment, and have an impact on our oceans. After World War II finished, modern consumerism and mass consumption proliferated around the world, and has been on the rise ever since with no signs of slowing down. This has built up to us now living in a disposable society that is causing immeasurable damage to the environment, such as causing environmental pressures and accelerating climate change at a rate that is racing towards an irreversible tipping point.

This series will explore the impacts the fashion and cosmetic industries and single-use plastics have on the environment, with the first four images in the series focusing on the former, and the last four images focusing on the latter. These areas felt significant to investigate, as five out of the top ten ocean pollutants are caused by single-use plastics, the fashion industry is believed to be the second most polluting industry worldwide, and three of the top ten ocean polluting companies were umbrella cosmetic and personal care brands. Whilst some progress is being made within these areas to become less environmentally damaging, there is still an incredibly long way to go, and it is imperative consumers begin to understand how their actions directly affect the environment with every purchase they make, before it is too late and irreparable damage occurs. However, around 70% of participants (in a poll I conducted), said they had either no knowledge surrounding the environmental impacts of the fashion and cosmetic industries and single-use plastics, or that they had basic awareness, but that their knowledge could be improved.

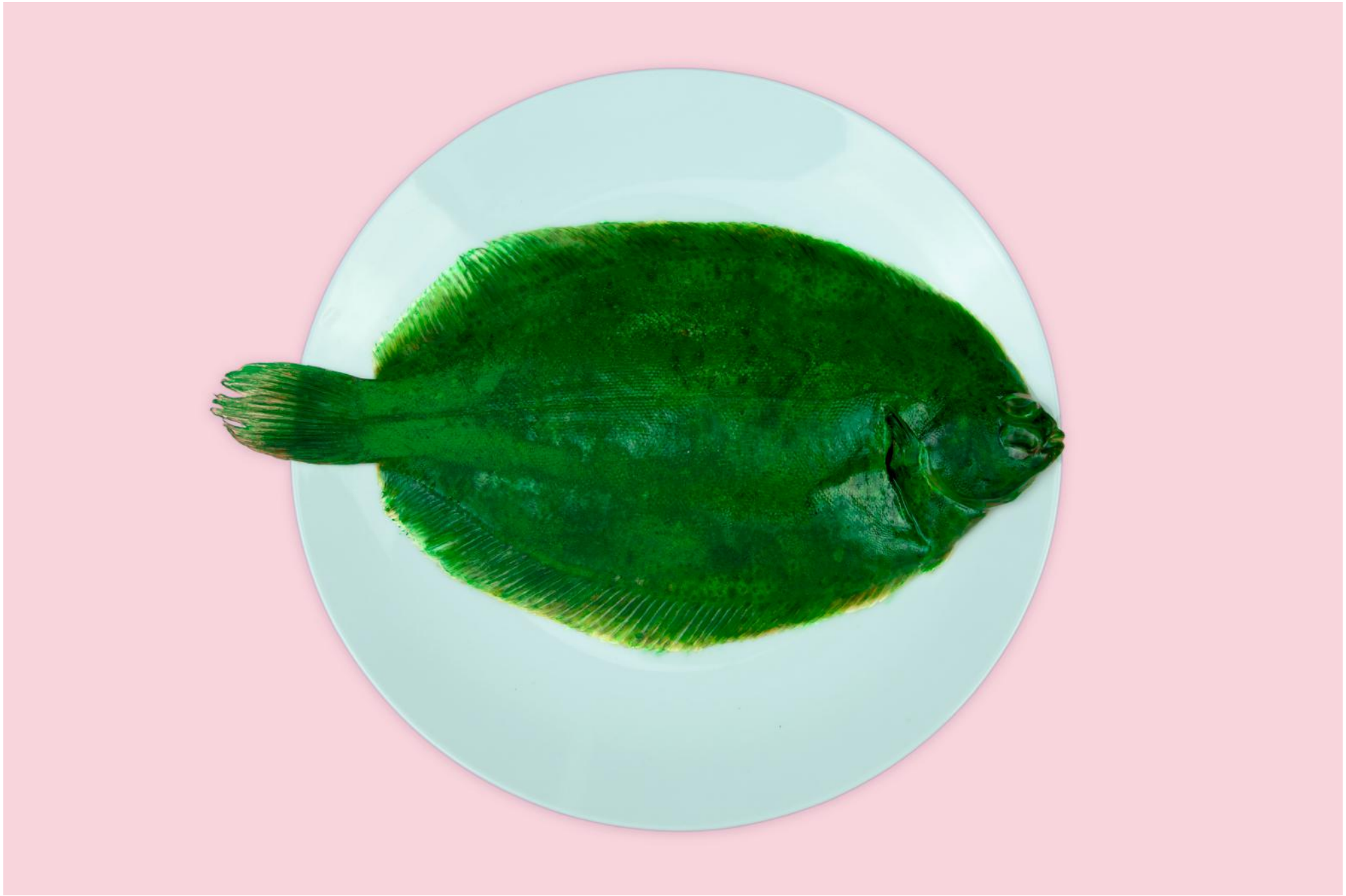
Therefore, *Project Change* aims to do exactly what it says, create change. By raising awareness about how the products we buy and/or the industries we buy into can have detrimental effects on our environment, *Project Change* will encourage the viewer to question and hopefully change their own consumer habits.

One of the most significant drivers of consumerism is advertising, and in 2020 over 578 billion US dollars was spent on advertising worldwide, illustrating the power advertising possesses. It influences many of our decisions every day, specifically regarding what we buy. One of the ways we are influenced is through slick advertising imagery, which this series follows the style of. *Project Change* was created with the intention that as well as being exhibited in a gallery context, it could also be outputted as an advertising campaign, positively influencing consumers and breaking up the usual advertising content consumed with the projects meaningful message. The photographs appear in a way that could be advertising what is on the consumer's plate, however, upon closer inspection, the photographs reveal there is something in the image that would not usually be present. The seafood on each plate has been juxtaposed by an object or something that represents an environmental issue, such as plastic pollution or toxic chemicals. Text is provided on the following pages to give further context. The ruined and damaged seafood visually demonstrates the direct impact of our actions on the ocean, and by the end of the series, there is no seafood left, as we have treated the oceans so poorly due to our consumer behaviours within a fast-paced global disposable society.

Microbeads are tiny pieces of plastic often found in personal care and cosmetic products such as toothpaste, facial cleansers, exfoliators etc. These beads do not breakdown, and not only contribute to plastic pollution within our oceans, but are a threat to aquatic life. Being less than 0.5mm in diameter, microbeads are too small to be filtered out by most wastewater treatment plants, leading to them collecting in our oceans, where they are easily absorbed by marine life. This can lead to fatal internal blockages, or can cause the animal to feel full, consequently stopping feeding and leading to death from starvation. If a predator then consumes a fish that is full of undigested microbeads, it passes digestive problems onto the predator. Additionally, microbeads are capable of releasing toxins into the water, and within a marine environment, these toxins move throughout the food chain, proving a further problem for marine life. Over 280 aquatic species have been known to ingest microbeads, and this number is only predicted to grow. Despite the UK banning microbeads in some cosmetic and personal care products in 2018, the ban doesn't cover all products, and microbeads remain in products such as sun cream and lipsticks.

Synthetic fibres and other fabrics containing plastic such as polyester, nylon and acrylic, equate for 60% of the materials our clothes are made of worldwide. The increase in the use of the fabrics, mirrors the growth of the fast-fashion industry, where clothes are produced and sold cheaply in response to the latest trends. Being produced cheaply means using inexpensive fabrics such as synthetic fibres, as a way to reduce costs, but the costs this has on our oceans is catastrophic. Similarly to microbeads, microfibres pass through wastewater treatment plants due to their minute size, and enter our oceans when we wash our clothes. It is estimated that 500,000 tons of microfibres get released into the ocean each year – the equivalent to 50,000 plastic bottles – with a single wash releasing hundreds of thousands of microfibres. Once in the ocean, synthetic microfibres do not break down easily, and have a high plastic content, meaning they could remain in our oceans for hundreds of years. As well as microbeads, microfibres are also consumed by a variety of marine animals, with 100% of mussels tested containing microplastics. This is not only passed through the oceanic food chain, but enters our food chain as humans too. With the fast-fashion industry continually rising, it is anticipated that the volume of microfibres in our oceans will also rise, significantly contributing to oceanic plastic pollution.

When rinse-off personal care products, or residue from cosmetic products previously used on our skin wash down our drains, they make their way through rivers and lakes and into our oceans. Many ingredients used in cosmetic and personal care products do not easily break down, and when in aquatic environments, this results in aquatic toxicity, which is detrimental to aquatic life and the balance of the ecosystem. Common chemicals used in cosmetics and personal care products such as Dioxane, Triclocan and Diethanolamine have been known to have appalling and fatal impacts on marine life. They can alter the behaviour, biochemistry and reproductive cycles of fish, cause genetic mutations in amphibians and can create toxic environments that kill aquatic life. Furthermore, ingredients such as Oxybenzone are found in sun creams and contribute significantly to coral bleaching, destroying entire ecosystems. There are many ways to create cosmetics without these toxic chemicals, but this is costly and takes time, so it is often neglected, resulting in disastrous impacts on our oceans.

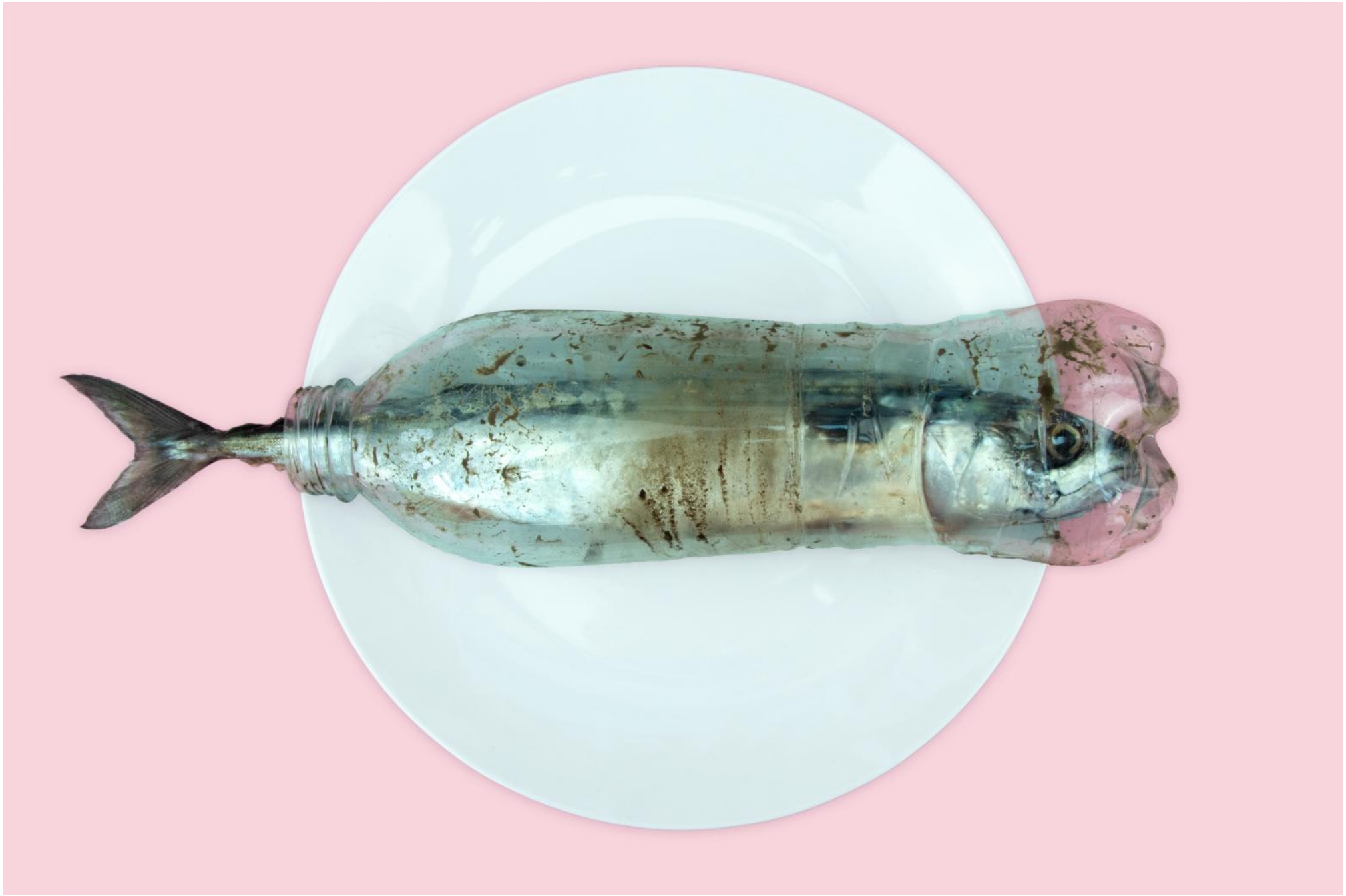


Textile dying is the world's second largest pollutant of water, and the most polluting process involved in creating our clothes, as excess dye is incorrectly and unsafely disposed of from textile factories all around the world. Approximately 200 tonnes of water are used per every tonne of fabric, and once the coloured water has been used, it is disposed of and returned to nature. However, this dyed water is usually returned containing surplus dye and toxic chemicals, entering rivers and making its way into the oceans, spreading around the globe. When in the ocean, the dye reduces plants abilities to photosynthesize, causing oxygen levels in the water to be reduced, consequently killing aquatic animals and plants. This is an issue that is particularly prevalent in less economically developed countries, as this is often where Western brands outsource their manufacturing. Fast fashion factories in these countries lack the resources to dispose of the dyed water safely, and the cheapest method is disposing the water in rivers and lakes. This is a problem that progresses with every season in the fashion industry, as a new season brings new trends and colours, which in turn results in new chemicals, dyes and pigments being used and increased volumes being washed out into our oceans.

Plastic is used throughout supermarkets across the country, due to being a cheap and easy way to package food. It is used in the form of plastic bags, plastic drink can holders, plastic food packaging etc, and it is all incredibly damaging to our oceans. The average plastic bag is used for just 12 minutes, yet takes over 500 years to decompose, and is very harmful to our oceans and marine life. Marine animals such as turtles often mistake the bags for jellyfish. Consumption of plastic bags can pass through the food chain and affect animals of all sizes, as well as also being fatal, killing 100,000 aquatic animals every year. Despite the introduction of the plastic bag charge and a knock-on increase of reusable bags, one million plastic bags are still used every minute, totalling to 500 billion a year. Regarding plastic food packaging, in 2019, the top ten UK supermarkets sold 900,000 tonnes of plastic packaging. This is a figure of great concern, considering only a third of plastic food packaging is recycled and plastic production is expected to rise, which would lead to unimaginable consequences for our oceans.

Single-use, disposable cutlery is one of the top ten ocean pollutants, and is therefore a significant contributor to plastic pollution. As minimal amounts of plastic worldwide is actually recycled, 32% of plastic produced annually enters our oceans – the equivalent of a refuse lorry of plastic being emptied into our oceans every minute, of every day. This type of cutlery is especially prominent on the coastline due to seaside takeaways, and as a result of the lightweight plastic, it can make its way into the ocean, whether it has been littered or thrown in a bin. Once in the ocean, this non-biodegradable cutlery can last for hundreds of years, and as a result of being sharp, it can easily injure and consequently kill marine animals. If our habits do not change, by 2050 there will be the equivalent of four refuse lorry emptied into the ocean every minute, and more plastic in the fish than sea.

Plastic straws are also in the top ten items that pollute our oceans. Similarly to plastic cutlery, straws are particularly lightweight, meaning they easily make their way into our oceans. As plastic straws are non-biodegradable due to the polypropylene used to manufacture them, they remain in our oceans for hundreds of years, and can cause severe damage throughout this time. Their small size makes them easily ingestible by ocean birds and marine animals. This can have a similar impact to microbeads, creating the illusion of the animal being full, causing it to starve to death. Once the animal dies, the animal will typically biodegrade, yet the straw inside will remain intact, and will be washed back into the ocean, beginning this cycle all over again. Plastic straws that accumulate on the surface can also prevent sunlight from reaching algae and plankton under the water's surface, inhibiting their ability to photosynthesise. This threatens the entire marine food chain, and could result in reduced seafood being accessible to humans too. Furthermore, when the plastic straws eventually begin to break down, they can release harmful chemicals that cause further pollution and health problems for marine life. Whilst the UK and other countries are introducing bans on plastic straws, many countries worldwide are yet to follow suit, meaning plastic straws are still in circulation and are still negatively impacting our oceans, combined with the decades of damage previous plastic straw use has left behind.



Out of the 300 million tons of plastic produced annually, half of that is single-use, disposable items that will only be used once, meaning we throw away 150 million tons of plastic every year. One of the most problematic single-use items are plastic bottles, being the third most polluting item in the ocean. One million plastic bottles are sold every minute, with less than half of these being recycled, hence the vast quantity that amount in our oceans. Once in the oceans, plastic bottles accumulate together with other forms of plastic pollution, forming oceanic garbage patches known as gyres. There are currently five significant oceanic gyres, which circulate ocean currents, pulling in marine debris found on coastlines. The largest gyre is the Great Pacific Garbage Patch, which is three times the size of France, demonstrating the severity of the problem. These plastic objects accumulate as they are non-biodegradable, with a plastic bottle taking over 450 years to biodegrade. However, when they do begin to degrade, they break down and are ingested by marine life. This could result in plastic being consumed by humans, as plastic is now found in a third of UK-caught fish. With plastic production expected to rise, this poses a serious threat to the health of our oceans, marine life and humans.

The previous images have all shown how detrimental the effects of consumerism can be on our oceans, and the marine life within them. Without change, there will be unimaginable impacts, such as having more plastic than fish in the sea by 2050. Our behaviours will also affect the seafood that is available to us, not only as a result of consumer led over-fishing, but by the consequences of our actions on the oceans. If our behaviours do not change, our oceans will be irreversibly damaged, and seafood will soon disappear from our menu, shop shelves and diet.