

Looking at plastics

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[pet](#) Looking at plastics, the second of our big environmental problems. The first thing to say is the problem is an enormous one. Its really not possible to go anywhere without seeing plastic waste. The plastics problem falls into two parts. Firstly the plastics themselves which for the most part due to their linear molecular structure are not biodegradable. At least only over the very long term (1000 years or so give or take) although weather and UV light breaks them into small pieces - unfortunately. The second problem with plastics is the plasticisers added to give the plastics specific properties such as softness, hardness etc. These smaller molecules leach into the environment and could be having biological effects on us and animals. We have all seen pictures of animals (particularly sea life) with plastic wrapped around them or having swallowed plastics. The really bad news is that microscopic plastic particles are in the food chain and we are eating them. The good news is that there is a real political will to tackle this problem. Increasingly governments are banning or taxing plastics of various sorts. Since certainly in the UK you cannot go anywhere without seeing plastic litter, its a bit difficult for politicians to deny the problem exists. Technology is catching up. I worked in the same building as a company developing a "plastic" wrapping material from shellfish that is biodegradable. Other companies are developing bioplastics and there is news that bacteria have been discovered that will break down some plastics. Scientists have also discovered some ways of chemically degrading some plastics to make new raw plastic materials. At the same time other companies and individuals as I covered on this site have worked out ways of using plastic in road building (it even prevents pot holes). Some big food retailers have pledged to get rid of all plastic on their own brand labels. I buy chocolate that comes with an inner rapper that looks like plastic but is biodegradable cellulose. There is company near me that makes completely biodegradable cups. I think in 5 years time we will at the very least have a lot less plastic packaging of all sorts and a large number plastic free isles in supermarkets at the same time big strides will have been made into recycling plastic better. The really big problem is not so much of how not to create more getting into the environment, but to recover what is already out there. The big bits (anything you can see) in theory could be recovered although the task is on a vast scale (people are working on this). Recovering the microscope plastics is in the realms of science fiction. That is why we need to all try to prevent any more getting out there - fast The Neil

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