



UN | ART EXHIBITION | ENVIRONMENT
By [Penelope Bunn](#)

Planet or Plastic?



Photo Credit: Creative Director | Model: Penelope Bunn; Photographer | Graphics: Eric von Lockhart

A photo exhibition by **National Geographic** was unveiled at the United Nations on 4 June 2019 by the President of the UN General Assembly, **María Fernanda Espinosa**, together with Oscar, Tony, Emmy and Grammy recipient, **Whoopi Goldberg**, as part of the campaign to beat plastic pollution and to commemorate **World Environment Day (5 June)**. The exhibition, **Planet or Plastic?**, poignantly raises awareness about plastic pollution and the global plastic trash crisis as well as provides background on the history of plastic and its uses, the issues that the rise of plastic use has caused, and steps we can take to reduce our own plastic waste.

[4ocean.com](#) gave away adorable handmade bracelets (above) that they produce from recycled materials they remove from the ocean (which you can buy too). To me, this bracelet is more valuable than diamonds, because not only will it last forever like a diamond, I'm making an important environmental statement by wearing it.

Presenters included Her Excellency, [Maria Fernando Espinosa](#), President of the UN General Assembly; His Excellency, [Gaston Browne](#), The Prime Minister of Antigua and Barbuda; Her Excellency, [Mari Skåre](#), Norway's Deputy Permanent Representative to the United Nations; and **Andrew Cooper**, Co-Founder of 4ocean, were among the presenters. Each presenter shared their concerns about plastics in our oceans, with emphasis on single-use plastics, and their hopes for the future.



Espinosa said, “do we need to go through one trillion plastic bags a year? Do we? Do we need billions of coffee lids tossed aside after moments of use? I don't think so.”

The President of the General Assembly said, “we must choose to phase out single-use plastics” and noted that “together with the office of the Secretary-General, and partners such as **Culinart**, we have now officially removed single-use plastics from UN Headquarters.”

“We must choose to phase out single-use plastics. I am very proud to say that as promised to member states in September, I have made the issue of single-use plastics a key objective of my presidency. On the home front, and together with the office of the Secretary-General, and partners such as Culinart, we have now officially removed single-use plastics from UN Headquarters. This is wonderful.”

The incoming President of the General Assembly, **Tijjani Mohammad-Bande**, said, “we all have to do all that is within our power to end plastic pollution beneath the oceans if our fight against climate change will be successful.”

The President-elect said “this is important because the repercussions of climate change reverberate around the world. In Africa for example, it has exacerbated conflicts and terrorism, thereby destroying the livelihood of tens of millions of people.”

Goldberg told the story of a conservancy project that got her involved in the issue.

She said, “two guys said, so, we decided to do something. And so, what they did was they talked to the fishermen where they worked and said, listen, how much do you make fishing? Let us pay you instead to clean the ocean where you are.”

Goldberg added, “and I thought, wow, what a great, simple, idea, and I lost my mind. So, I thought, one person, two people, can make a huge difference.”

The exhibit, a partnership between **National Geographic** and the **Office of the President of the General Assembly**, and supported with funding from the **Government of Monaco**, strives to highlight how this simple material reshaped both global industries and everyday life, and how it has become such an important component of life on earth.

At the same time, the exhibit draws attention to the problems in our consumption and production patterns, showcasing how disposable and single use plastics – some used for mere seconds but lasting for centuries – are overwhelming our planet and jeopardizing the health and well-being of people and of ecosystems around the globe.

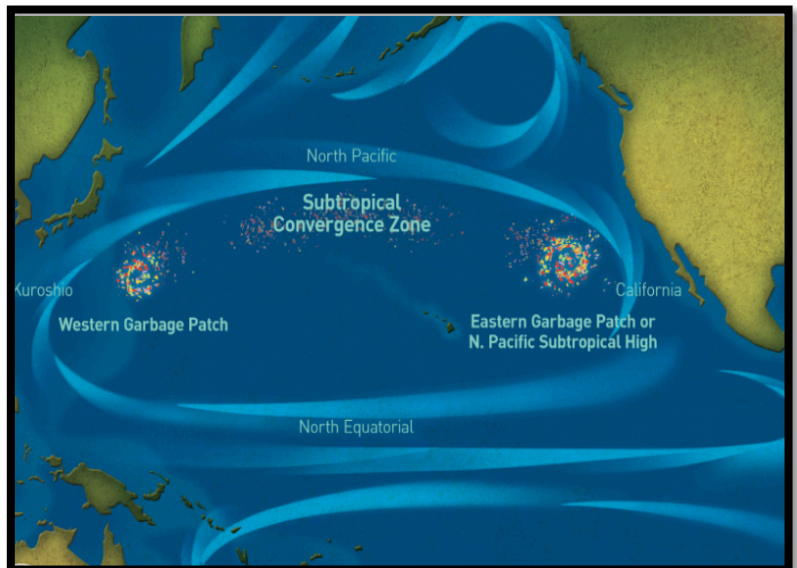
UNGA President Espinosa stated, “It is estimated that by 2050, there will be more plastic than fish in the sea. Microplastics are now confirmed in table salt, in fresh water, and each person on the planet is believed to have plastic in their bodies.” To help end the scourge of plastic pollution in the ocean, UNGA President Espinosa has launched a [Global Campaign Against Plastic Pollution](#) and a call to action, holding both consumers and decision-makers accountable, urging the **phasing out and banning of single-use plastics** such as plastic water bottles, shopping bags, storage bags, straws, and cotton swabs, and raising awareness of the impact plastic pollution has on human and environmental health. “I intend to leverage the capacity of the office of the President of the General Assembly, to support ongoing global campaigns to beat plastic pollution. This will include complementary efforts by [UN Environment \(UNEP\)](#), [Global Citizen](#),

and [National Geographic](#) amongst others. "UNGA President Espinosa said the campaign is comprised of two elements: global advocacy and internal initiatives to reduce plastics use within the UN (which she has successfully accomplished!). The initiative to stamp out plastic has been highlighted by events across the globe; including one celebrating innovative progress in New York City ([UN-NYC Office](#)), the [Play It Out](#) concert in Antigua & Barbuda (below), and the photo exhibition (above). Campaign sponsors included:



According to a recent [UN report](#), about 8 million metric tons of plastic are thrown into the ocean annually which is equal to dumping one garbage truck of plastic per minute, at a cost of around \$8 billion in damage to marine ecosystems. 80% of all pollution in the oceans comes from people on land. This waste causes the deaths of approximately 1,000,000 seabirds and 100,000 marine mammals every year. Other studies have estimated that at least five trillion pieces of plastic are floating in the world's oceans, and while a majority of this plastic debris sinks or washes ashore, much of it is floating in five gigantic, slow-moving whirlpools nicknamed Vortexes. Whales have washed up on shores, having choked on plastic bags. Adventurers have spotted lumps of polystyrene packaging floating in the Southern Ocean, one of the most remote parts of the earth. Even tests on bottled water from all corners of the globe have found microscopic plastic particles in every sample.

Many groups have targeted the [single-use plastic straws](#) in an effort to reduce plastic waste. It is estimated that 12 billion straws are used worldwide every year, and they are frequently one of the top 10 items found in beach cleanups. While [some countries and cities have sought to ban single-use plastic straws outright](#), a number of companies like [Starbucks](#) and [McDonald's](#) have voluntarily agreed to eliminate or dramatically decrease the use of single-use plastic straws in the coming years. Another culprit is the [plastic bag](#). An estimated one trillion bags are used each year globally, and the average American throws away 10 single-use bags per week. According to the [Honorable Andrew M. Cuomo](#), Governor of New York State (USA), "New Yorkers alone use 23 billion bags per year" – More than enough, when tied together, to stretch to the moon and back 13 times. Dozens of countries have either banned the use of plastic bags altogether or they have imposed fees to discourage their use. According to [Forbes.com](#), a number of companies, nonprofit organizations and government agencies have advocated moving away from a linear economy (where we make and dispose of plastic) to a more circular system (where we keep plastic in the economy and out of the natural environment).



UNEP also launched the [Global Plastics Platform](#), a network to foster commitments to reduce plastic pollution by exploring innovative designs, and methods of consumption and disposal of plastics around the world. Last year, the agency headed up the [Clean Seas Campaign](#) to urge a ban on single-use plastic, after findings revealed **there were 500 times more microplastic particles littering the ocean, than there are stars in the galaxy.**

ANTIGUA & BARBUDA



The Prime Minister of Antigua & Barbuda, planet protector and visionary, [His Excellency, Gaston Browne](#), states, “Plastic pollution is a global issue that spans borders and my government recognizes the urgency and the responsibility we all must undertake as citizens of this planet in combating the effects of plastic pollution. As the first country in the region to ban the use of single-use plastics, Antigua & Barbuda is committed to making a difference and leading by example. We need to protect our oceans and we are calling on all nations to join us in banning...single use plastics”.

NORWAY

Ambassador Mari Skåre, Norway’s Deputy Permanent Representative to the United Nations states, “We are strong supporters of the initiative and the reason is that we have a problem with plastic pollution. Norway knows this. We know it is a health problem for the oceans and for humans. Fish eat plastic, humans eat fish”, she said. “The good news is that we have solutions. We can solve this. This is why this global campaign is so important. If you are consumers, use your own bottle. We want to pull our weight in finding good, clean solutions for our common future.”

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