



CTA-077-Solve Plastic Pollution-World's Oceans

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Reprinted 9/5/17

We're Never Going to Solve Plastic Pollution If All We Do Is Clean Up Beaches



[Harriet Spark](#)



Photo: Jemma Scott

At first glance, Chilli Beach in Cape York looks like your quintessential tropical coastline.

Fringed by coconut trees and bordered by turquoise water, it's the kind of place you'd see slapped on a postcard. That is until you look down. Strewn along the 6.7 kilometers of sand is a vast expanse of plastic confetti, brought in to shore by ocean currents. Hundreds of thousands of brightly colored plastic fragments, meters and meters of

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rope, fishing nets, rubber thongs (5,547 to be precise), and thousands of other man-made items dot the beach, transforming the tropical paradise into the kind of beachside view that's becoming more and more common around the world.

Every year, marine conservation group [Tangaroa Blue](#) and a crew of enthusiastic volunteers head to some of Australia's most remote beaches to pick up other people's rubbish. This year, I joined them for their annual clean up of Chilli Beach in Kutini-Payamu National Park, Cape York as part of environmental organization [Clean Coast Collective's](#) Trash Tribe; a group of ten people passionate about using their skills to help keep plastic out of our oceans.

Six years ago, Tangaroa Blue cleaned Chilli Beach for the first time, collecting more than five tons of rubbish in just five days. Each year after that, the annual rubbish haul began to decline, averaging at around three tons a year. So last week, when the team of 40 volunteers and I hit the beach, we did so with an optimistic outlook. We were going to get this done and dusted in four days, with a day left over to spend lounging on the beach like normal holiday-goers. Instead, we spent eight hours a day removing trash from the shoreline and logging every individual item in the organization's online database. Over the five days, we picked up a record-breaking seven tons of rubbish, filling more than eight hundred bags with trash that had accumulated along the beach since last year's clean up.



Photo: Jemma Scott

Founding CEO of Tangaroa Blue, Heidi Taylor, believes "if all we do is clean up, that's all we'll ever do." This mantra is the foundation of Tangaroa Blue. Rather than simply disposing of all the garbage we collected every day, we sorted it into detailed categories. Tangaroa Blue is the ocean's own team of private investigators. The data this organization collects on marine debris allows them to piece together where these items are originating from and how to stop them at their source by driving business or policy change.

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There's one thing that's immediately evident from our data collection efforts – we use a lot of single-use plastic. [Fifty percent of plastic](#) created is used just once and then tossed away, and every piece of plastic ever created still exists somewhere. [Eight million tons](#) of different plastics make their way to the ocean on an annual basis. And [in just over thirty years](#), every seabird on the planet will have ingested plastic. Our own use of plastic is killing our oceans year by year.

90 percent of the rubbish we collected on Chilli Beach originated outside of Australia. It would be easy to throw our hands in the air with a dismissive “not our problem,” but when it comes to over consumption and plastic pollution, we’re in no position to point the finger at anybody else. Walk down any supermarket aisle and it’s clear we’re addicted to plastic as much as the rest of the world. Every year, Australians use more than one billion plastic coffee cups and consume around thirty liters of bottled water each.

Protecting our oceans is a global responsibility that needs far more attention from industries and government, and just as importantly, from individuals. During this year’s clean up, we counted more than 2,000 toothbrushes, combs, razors, and more than 3,000 plastic drink bottles. There are plenty of reusable alternatives available to these single-use items like bamboo toothbrushes and stainless steel water bottles. How we spend our money matters, and seemingly simple actions have a huge collective impact on our oceans.

While Heidi and the rest of the team at Tangaroa Blue continue their work as ocean detectives, driving policy change with their collected data, we all have the power to stop our own plastic pollution at its source. We don’t need to wait for policy to change. We can be the change (as cliché as that sounds), and we must. Otherwise, year after year, tons of rubbish will continue to wash up on coastlines all over the globe just the same as it does at Chilli Beach. Like Heidi says, if all we do is clean up, that’s all we’ll ever do.

“Do all you can to support [our effort](#) to extract plastics and debris for the ocean starting with the Cook Islands” when we covert plastics to fuels that run the operation, it is a beautiful solution to a dirty problem WFCRC Director

For additional reading see [The WFCRC Document Gallery](#) for articles about:

- Public Service Announcements (PSA)
- Coral Alert Network (CAN)
- Emergency Reporting Reports (ERR)
- Call to Action (CTA)
- Marine Protected Areas (MPA)
- Marine Life Alert (MLA)
- Seismic and Oil Production Threats
- Natural Science Reports (NSR)
- Oil Spill Alerts (OSA)
- And other miscellaneous documents

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