



# CTA-102-Tiny Plastic Pellets Choking Oceans Join WFCRC

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## The Fight Against The Tiny Plastic Pellets Choking Our Oceans

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Our addiction to plastic has serious consequences.



By [Tess Riley](#)

COLLEEN HUGHSON



Nurdles, seen here, are small plastic pellets that pollute beaches and kill sea life. Our oceans are under siege. Plastic forks, disintegrating shopping bags, fragmented blocks of Styrofoam and a seemingly endless amount of drinking bottles are just a few examples of the debris swirling around the seas and washing up on our shores.

Take another look at this plastic soup, and you'll likely spot something few people have ever heard of: [nurdles](#).

Unlike [microbeads](#), which are used in consumer products like face scrub, nurdles are basically the building blocks for other plastics. Companies buy nurdles by the billions every year to make nearly all the plastic products we buy.

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Residents in Durban, a city on South Africa's east coast, are learning about this industrial raw material the hard way. Last month, a container full of nurdles washed off a ship belonging to the [Mediterranean Shipping Company](#) into port waters during a thunderstorm — an event so destructive it's been [compared](#) to an oil spill. The city's beaches are now overrun with the pellets.

PAUL MCKENZIE

Nurdles washed up along the coastline of Durban, South Africa, after a thunderstorm.

Nurdles pose significant dangers for wildlife. Marine animals — including fish, turtles and birds — mistake the pellets for food, leading them to become malnourished or starved. They also [attract chemical pollutants](#), releasing toxins into the animals that eat them and increasing the risk that those toxins will enter the human food chain.

Trawling beaches for small plastic pellets might sound daunting, but that isn't stopping Durbanites from getting involved. Local resident Anelda Keet and her family have been out on one of the affected beaches helping sift through the sand.

"It's awesome to see so many people on the beach helping to clean up, but it's going to take a long time and a lot of people to get it done," she said.



ANELDA KEET

Siblings Alexis, 12, and Sabastian Keet, 8, collected nudrles on Durban's uShaka Beach.



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Hayley Bevis took part in the cleanup effort at Durban's Vetchies Beach after her son's primary school organized a cleanup get-together for parents and students last weekend.

"We were determined to collect as many as we could," Bevis said. "I'm sad at the state of our beaches and feel the company responsible should be doing more to help clean up the spill. The general public are doing what they can, but are overwhelmed, and some feel their efforts won't make an impact."



HAYLEY BEVIS

Local resident Hayley Bevis picks up handfuls of nurdles on Vetchies Beach in Durban.

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While spills such as the recent one in Durban and past spills [in Hong Kong](#) and [the U.K.](#) grab headlines, the bigger issue is the constant trickle of pellets into the environment when they're produced, transported and manufactured into plastics.

These leaks can be the result of bad practice. In 2015, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency [fined](#) California-based plastic manufacturer Canyon Plastics \$19,000 after authorities found spilled nurdles throughout the facility's waste management area and loading docks.

"This is an issue for industry, and it's industry's job to clean it up," said Dr. Jeremy Conkle, head of the [Coastal Health and Water Quality Lab](#) at Texas A&M University-Corpus Christi.

One scheme to prevent plastics like nurdles from entering the marine environment is Operation Clean Sweep, an international, industry-devised initiative. Its voluntary nature and lack of auditing, however, makes it hard to know what progress has been made since it began more than 25 years ago, said Sarah Archer, project manager for the environmental charity [FIDRA](#).

"We would like to see governments taking action by putting in place legislation that will ensure pellet loss is prevented across the entire supply chain," Archer said.

There isn't a huge amount of legislation around plastic pollution in the U.S., especially when it comes to [making the producers responsible](#) for plastic waste. However, California [passed a law](#) in 2008 which specifically names nurdles as a pollutant and bans their discharge into waterways in the state.

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Nurdles are just one example of how the global economy is addicted to plastic — and how we ignore the terrible damage it causes. Some 6.3 billion metric tons of plastic have entered the global waste stream since large-scale production began in the 1950s, and around [79 percent](#) of that is now in landfills or scattered across the oceans.

"We have an economic system that's built on making a profit," said Julie Andersen, global executive director of [Plastic Oceans Foundation](#), "so we need to work out how to engage businesses to bring them into a dialogue to make better decisions, and also how to engage the public so they can understand the economics and use their money wisely."

There is reason to be positive, according to Antonia Gawel, head of the World Economic Forum's [Circular Economy](#) initiative. "There is a model for economic growth that can reverse these trends. We need to migrate to a circular economy where sustainable resources are not just used but re-used," she said.

This model — in which resources serve a constant purpose through reuse, repurposing and recycling — is already taking hold, Gawel said, but the challenge is to ramp up the public and private sectors' progress.

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