

Enhanced education could help turn the tide on marine litter

February 21 2018, by Alan Williams



Items of plastic litter found on a beach in Cornwall. Credit: University of Plymouth

Finding a solution to the causes and impacts of marine litter is now widely recognised as one of the major environmental challenges of our time. And one of the key elements required to address the issue is encouraging people of all ages to move away from the current throwaway culture.

Now research led by the University of Plymouth has revealed that

designing systematic and innovative education tools to teachers and students can make a significant and positive contribution to their understanding of the problem - and their willingness to do something about it.

The study, published in *Marine Policy*, was a collaboration with the Mediterranean Information Office for Environment, Culture and Sustainable Development in Greece and the Coastal and Marine Union in The Netherlands.

It is the first quantitative assessment of European students' and educators' attitudes to marine litter before and after participating in an online educational project designed to raise awareness and inspire action in the younger generation.

Dr Sabine Pahl, Associate Professor (Reader) in Psychology at the University of Plymouth, said: "It is clear that the education sector represents an important agent of social change in society. This study shows that working with educators and school students has much potential to facilitate greater public understanding of complex environmental issues and to make them part of the solutions. It has important implications for marine policy, and demonstrates that, beyond providing mere knowledge and facts, employing creative tools and techniques can enable action."

For the study, academics enrolled 120 educators from 18 countries across Europe in an online training course about marine litter, asking them to complete a series of assessments to ascertain how it changed their attitudes.

The results showed the educators had high intentions of implementing the materials in their teaching, and planned to encourage others in their network, which may lead to the training and resources to be distributed

more widely.

They also invited 341 students aged seven to 18 from 12 European countries to take part in a video competition through which they were encouraged to make a two-minute video on the problem's potential sources, impacts and solutions.

After taking part, they said they were more concerned about the problem and perceived greater negative impacts and causes. They also reported performing more waste reduction behaviours.

The study builds on the University's interdisciplinary research into marine [litter](#), with previous such studies showing [marine litter can undermine the benefits of coastal environments](#) and that the [public's love of the seas](#) could be the key to solving plastic pollution.

Professor Richard Thompson OBE, Head of the International Marine Litter Research Unit at the University and one of the study's authors, added: "Over recent years, the world has really woken up to the global threat posed by [marine litter](#). But while recognising the problem is one thing, increasing knowledge and changing behaviours are a far greater challenge. This research demonstrates educators can play a lead role in that, and it is essential to educate young people now so that they and future generations can live in a world without the threat of plastic pollution."

More information: Bonny L. Hartley et al, Turning the tide on trash: Empowering European educators and school students to tackle marine litter, *Marine Policy* (2018). [DOI: 10.1016/j.marpol.2018.02.002](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.marpol.2018.02.002)

Provided by University of Plymouth

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