

Hugh, me and everybody: Join the war on plastic pollution

June 25 2019, by Elisabeth Whitebread



Credit: Edward Marshall/FFI

Last night saw the final installment of *War on Plastic with Hugh and Anita* on BBC One, featuring Fauna & Flora International (FFI) vice-president Hugh Fearnley-Whittingstall, which has once again got the nation talking about our plastic footprint.

That there may be 19.5 billion items of single-use plastic in UK households is alarming, but sadly not surprising. Around half the [plastic waste](#) we produce globally is packaging designed to be used just once. We know that, far from being recycled in perfectly closed loop systems, vast quantities of plastic are leaking into our waterways and oceans, where they are causing harm to marine life. More than 180 different species, including mammals, fish, birds and invertebrates, are known to have eaten plastic. Once eaten, plastic can cause choking, damage to the gut, as well as a false feeling of fullness that may lead creatures to starve.

At FFI we've been working on solutions to [marine plastic pollution](#) for a decade. Below is our take on some of the areas covered by War on Plastic—and what we think needs to happen next.

Plastic waste exports

It was absolutely shocking to see the piles of illegally dumped waste in Malaysia, much of it low-grade plastic that is economically unviable for recycling within current systems. As we noted in our joint NGO report No Time To Waste released last month, it is incumbent upon rich nations such as the UK to minimise the export of plastic waste, and at the very least to ensure that receiving countries are able to process it. As Hugh's conversation with a family living near a plastic dumpsite illustrated, our report shows that as well as impacts on marine life, people in low-income countries are facing numerous threats to their health related to plastic waste. Up to one million people could be dying every year as a result.

But the solution to this crisis doesn't lie solely with governments reducing exports. Multinational consumer goods companies must take the lion's share of the blame for pushing disposable plastic products onto countries that do not have adequate waste management systems in place. At FFI we are calling on multinationals to proactively adopt Extended

Producer Responsibility schemes in low income countries, which would see them take responsibility for the plastic pollution they create, rather than asking some of the poorest people on the planet to bear the costs.

Plastic microfibres from textiles

In the programme, Hugh discovers that his 100% polyester top is shedding plastic when it's put in the wash. It's great to see War on Plastic putting pressure on clothing brands to inform consumers about the shed risk of their clothing. Plastic microfibres from the textiles industry are one of the highest sources of direct microplastic pollution to the oceans, with an estimated 190,000 tonnes entering the marine environment annually. However, this estimate covers only post-consumer pollution, i.e. fibres that go down the drain from washing machines. At FFI we believe that a potentially much larger source of plastic microfibre pollution may be created pre-consumer, i.e. during manufacture. We would be interested to work with any brands that would like to investigate hotspots for leakage and potential solutions.

We want to see businesses up and down the textiles supply chain taking more responsibility for minimising the release of plastic microfibres into the environment. Our review of the evidence thus far suggests that innovating to redesign the yarns used to make fabric could be one of the most promising ways to reduce shedding.

Pre-production plastic pellets

During Hugh's visit to a plastic production plant, he learns about plastic pellets, or nurdles. Pellets are the building blocks of almost all plastic items. These lentil-sized microplastics are created from oil, and then transported to companies that add different properties (e.g. colours, flame retardants), before being transported again to manufacturers who

turn them into products. Unfortunately, we know that pellets are being spilt by companies across all stages of this supply chain, of which a significant proportion will make their way into drains, rivers, and ultimately the ocean.

Pellets are in fact the second largest source of direct microplastic pollution to the ocean with, it is estimated, up to 53 billion being spilled in the UK every year alone. Earlier this year, we found them polluting grey seal colonies in Norfolk, and our partner Fidra has found thousands of them all over the world via its Great Global Nurdle Hunt.

FFI has been working to reduce pellet leakage from the plastics industry for several years, and supports the introduction of a supply chain approach that will require all companies that produce or handle pellets to adopt best management practices—and, crucially, to be audited on their adoption of these by a third party. End users of [plastic](#), such as supermarkets who use food packaging made from pellets, should also have to prove that their supply chain is handling pellets responsibly.

Provided by Fauna & Flora International

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