

Pacific bird refuge struggles as ocean garbage patch grows

November 7 2019, by Caleb Jones



In this Oct. 22, 2019, photo, plastic sits in the decomposed carcass of a seabird on Midway Atoll in the Northwestern Hawaiian Islands. In one of the most remote places on Earth, Midway Atoll is a wildlife sanctuary that should be a safe haven for seabirds and other marine animals. Instead, creatures here struggle to survive as their bellies fill with plastic from faraway places. (AP Photo/Caleb Jones)

Flying into the uninhabited Northwestern Hawaiian Islands, Midway Atoll appears out of the vast blue Pacific as a tiny oasis of coral-fringed land with pristine white sand beaches that are teeming with life.

But on the ground, there's a different scene: plastic, pollution and death.

With virtually no predators, Midway is a haven for many species of seabirds and is home to the largest colony of albatross in the world.

But Midway is also at the center of the Great Pacific Garbage Patch, a vast area of floating plastic collected by circulating oceanic currents. The Hawaiian Islands act like a comb that gathers debris as it floats across the Pacific. A recent analysis found that the patch is accumulating debris at a faster rate than scientists previously thought.

Midway is littered with bird skeletons that have brightly colored plastic protruding from their decomposing bellies. Bottle caps, toothbrushes and cigarette lighters sit in the centers of their feathery carcasses.

"There isn't a bird that doesn't have some (plastic)," said Athline Clark, the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration's superintendent for Papahānaumokuākea Marine National Monument, which Midway is part of. They "fill their bellies up with plastics instead of food and eventually either choke or just don't have enough room for actual nourishment and perish."



In this Oct. 22, 2019, photo, plastic sits in the decomposed carcass of a seabird on Midway Atoll in the Northwestern Hawaiian Islands. Midway is littered with countless bird skeletons that have brightly colored plastic protruding from their now decomposing intestines. Bottle caps, toothbrushes and cigarette lighters sit in the centers of their feathery carcasses. (AP Photo/Caleb Jones)

Sharp plastic pieces can also perforate their intestines and esophagus.

Papahānaumokuākea, which quadrupled in size under President Barack Obama in 2016, is the world's largest marine conservation area and was inscribed in 2010 as a UNESCO mixed World Heritage site.

"Papahānaumokuākea is both a biologically rich and culturally sacred

place," Clark said. "The Hawaiians call it a place of abundance, or aina momona."

But circulating currents now bring an abundance of plastic and other trash from all around the Pacific Rim to Hawaii's beaches. The debris ranges from tiny microplastics that nearly every animal in this marine ecosystem ingests to huge fishing nets that gather plants, animals and other debris while bulldozing across fragile coral reefs.

"The estimates are that there's about 57,000 pounds of marine debris that washes ashore within this part of the archipelago annually," Clark said.



In this Oct. 15, 2019, photo, a green sea turtle rests on the beach among marine debris on Midway Atoll in the Northwestern Hawaiian Islands. In one of the

most remote places on Earth, Midway Atoll is a wildlife sanctuary that should be a safe haven for seabirds and other marine animals. (AP Photo/Caleb Jones)

U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service biologist Kelly Goodale lives and works on Midway, the site of a decisive World War II battle , and said the plastic that washes ashore there each year is just part of the problem.

"Not only are our beaches getting it, but also our albatross will bring it and feed it to their chicks," Goodale said.

Albatross spend much of their lives at sea feeding and flying thousands of miles across the oceans before returning to Midway each year to lay eggs and raise their young.

"So we estimate about 5 tons (4.5 metric tons) of plastic being brought to Midway every year just by adult albatross feeding it to their chicks," Goodale said.

The albatross tend to seek out squid eggs that attach themselves to floating pieces of plastic, which is why so many birds are eating the material, Clark said.



In this Oct. 15, 2019, photo, an endangered Hawaiian monk seal, left, and a green sea turtle rest on a beach on Midway Atoll in the Northwestern Hawaiian Islands. Halfway between North America and Asia in the middle of the Pacific Ocean, Midway Atoll is a tiny speck of land that U.S. officials have reserved as a wildlife sanctuary, home to some of the world's rarest seabirds and endangered marine animals. (AP Photo/Caleb Jones)



In this Oct. 15, 2019, photo, a seabird chick sits next to its burrow on Midway Atoll in the Northwestern Hawaiian Islands. In one of the most remote places on Earth, Midway Atoll is a wildlife sanctuary that should be a safe haven for seabirds and other marine animals. Instead, creatures here struggle to survive as their bellies fill with plastic from faraway places. (AP Photo/Caleb Jones)



In this Oct. 15, 2019, photo, a seabird sits in a tree on Midway Atoll in the Northwestern Hawaiian Islands. Flying into the uninhabited Northwestern Hawaiian Islands, Midway Atoll appears out of the vast blue Pacific as a tiny oasis of coral-fringed land with pristine white sand beaches that are teeming with life. But on the ground there's a different scene: Plastic, pollution and death. (AP Photo/Caleb Jones)



In this Oct. 22, 2019, photo, plastic and other marine debris sits on the beach on Midway Atoll in the Northwestern Hawaiian Islands. In one of the most remote places on Earth, Midway Atoll is a wildlife sanctuary that should be a safe haven for seabirds and other marine animals. Instead, creatures here struggle to survive as their bellies fill with plastic from faraway places. (AP Photo/Caleb Jones)



In this Oct. 15, 2019, photo, a Laysan duck, which is endemic to Hawaii and one of the rarest birds in the world, swims in a pond on Midway Atoll in the Northwestern Hawaiian Islands. With virtually no predators, Midway is a safe haven for many species of seabirds and is home to the largest colony of albatross in the world. But Midway is also at the center of the Great Pacific Garbage Patch, a vast area of floating plastic collected by circulating oceanic currents. (AP Photo/Caleb Jones)



In this Oct. 22, 2019, photo, dead seabirds lie on a pier with plastic debris on Midway Atoll in the Northwestern Hawaiian Islands. Midway is littered with countless bird skeletons that have brightly colored plastic protruding from their now decomposing intestines. Bottle caps, toothbrushes and cigarette lighters sit in the centers of their feathery carcasses. (AP Photo/Caleb Jones)



In this Oct. 15, 2019, photo, plastic sits in the decomposed carcass of a seabird

on Midway Atoll in the Northwestern Hawaiian Islands. The deaths are a visceral sign of the impact plastics have on the environment. In the Pacific and other oceans around the world, circulating currents pull together vast areas of plastic that seabirds and marine wildlife either eat or get entangled in. (AP Photo/Caleb Jones)



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In this Oct. 15, 2019, photo, seabirds fly over Midway Atoll in the Northwestern Hawaiian Islands. While understanding exactly how many birds die as a result of plastic in their stomachs is hard to do, researchers say the skeletons that dot the landscape of Midway are a visceral reminder of the impact plastic has on the environment. (AP Photo/Caleb Jones)

And it's not just the seabirds that are harmed by ocean plastic. Endangered Hawaiian monk seals and green sea turtles can die while entangled in plastic nets. Sharks and other apex predators eat smaller fish that feed on microplastic. Whales drag fishing line and buoys behind them during their long migrations across the world's oceans.

It's important to understand the relationship between the oceans, marine

life and humans, Clark said.

She shared a Native Hawaiian proverb: "Ma o ke kai pili ai kakou." It means, "The ocean connects us all."

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