

Britain's grey seal colony hotspots threatened by microplastics

14 February 2019, by Nathan Williams



Nurdles are tiny plastic [pellets](#) that are produced and melted together by the plastics industry to create new plastic products. Spilt and discarded by companies in industrial quantities, an estimated 53 billion nurdles end up in UK seas every year.

Seals are known to ingest microplastics, most probably as a result of eating prey that has itself consumed these miniature toxic time bombs. Scientific studies also suggest that microplastics such as nurdles may transport chemical contaminants into the bodies of marine animals that eat them.

Credit: Fauna & Flora International

An investigation by Fauna & Flora International (FFI) has found seal pups lying next to potentially toxic microplastics on Norfolk beaches. Britain experienced a record winter for seal pup births, but some of their most important breeding grounds are polluted by so-called 'nurdles'. The findings came on the eve of the Great Global Nurdle Hunt, which is encouraging members of the public to scour beaches across the world for these polluting pellets.

More than 3,000 [seal pups](#) were born at Blakeney National Nature Reserve in Norfolk this winter, while a record 2,000 births were recorded at nearby Horsey, but a recent field trip by FFI staff revealed hundreds of nurdles littering beaches near some of the pups' favourite spots.

Blakeney and the Horsey Dunes are listed as Special Areas of Conservation under the European Habitats Directive, but this protected status has clearly failed to keep them safe from [plastic pollution](#).

What are nurdles?



A handful of nurdles collected from a grey seal breeding hotspot in Norfolk. Credit: Edward Marshall/FFI

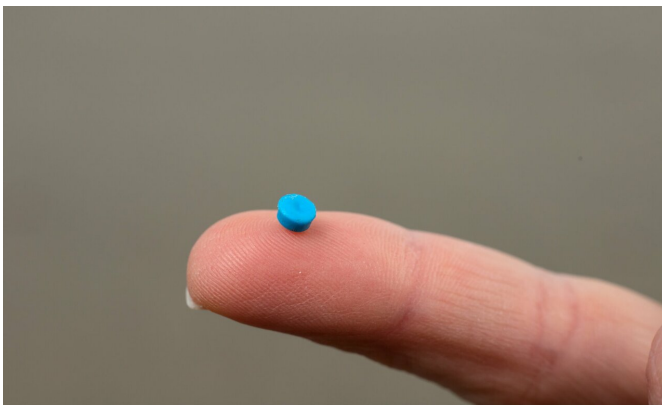
Dilyana Mihaylova, Marine Plastics Projects Manager at FFI, said: "All companies that make, use and transport nurdles must take action to stop these microplastics polluting Britain's beaches and damaging critical habitats for our iconic seal colonies. It is clear that nurdle pollution continues to be a chronic problem despite some voluntary efforts to prevent it. The plastics industry needs to implement robust measures across its entire supply chain to stop nurdle pollution."

The Great Global Nurdle Hunt

The findings shortly preceded the Great Global Nurdle Hunt, which is organised by environmental charity Fidra, one of FFI's partners in Scotland. The event started on Friday 8th February and will see volunteers scour the world's beaches for nurdles over a ten-day period. Last year a search of 279 sites in the UK found nurdles on 73% of them. One of the most polluted locations was a cove in Tregantle, Cornwall where more than 400,000 plastic pellets were found.



Nurdles on a Norfolk beach. Credit: Edward Marshall/FFI



Provided by Fauna & Flora International

The building blocks of all plastic products, nurdles like this one are spilt in their billions. Credit: Edward Marshall/FFI

Jasper Hamlet, Project Officer at Fidra said: "The Great Global Nurdle Hunt is an essential part of our work on [plastic](#) pellets. It raises awareness of nurdle pollution and shows that these pre-production pellets are reaching the environment and posing a threat to wildlife. We are inviting people to take part in The Great Global Nurdle Hunt, to collect essential data on pellet pollution worldwide and put pressure on the global plastics industry to ensure pellets are handled responsibly throughout the supply chain. It is easy and fun for people to take part in, but provides valuable information to help create positive change."

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