

ENDING PLASTIC POLLUTION IN SOUTH AFRICA BY 2030: FACT OR FICTION?



International Ocean Institute
African Region

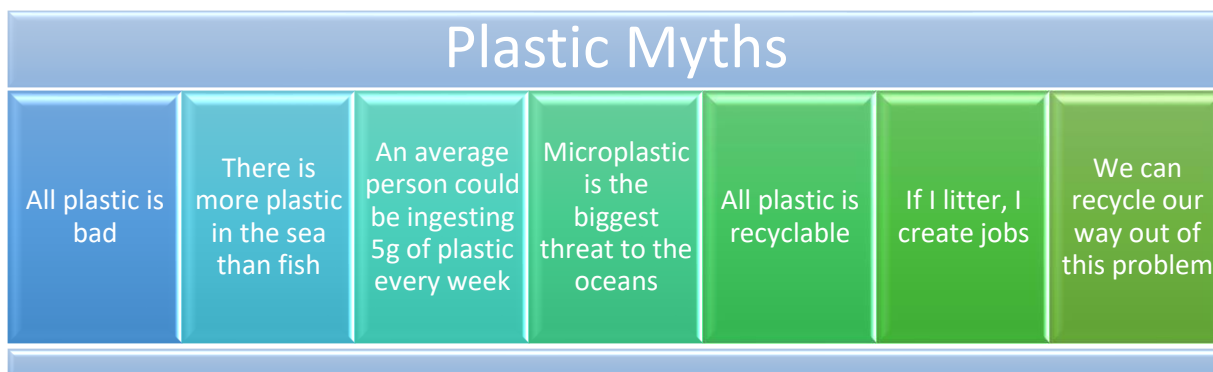


There is no doubt that the use, reuse and recycling of plastics is attracting more attention than it has previously, and yet, there is still so much confusion about plastics. What can be recycled? What is being recycled in South Africa? Is the carbon footprint saving worth the plastic packaging? Is plastic the epitome of evil consumerism or useful, light weight packaging material that cuts down on carbon footprint associated with transport and food waste? It can all get a bit overwhelming for the consumer and even for the manufacturers and retailers. Part of the trouble is that the discussion around plastic isn't really the emotive story about the turtle with a straw in its nose, it is the slightly boring story about chemistry and material science, pyrolysis and polyethylene and you can't get away from the fact that it is, just a little, complicated.

No one wants complicated, we want a simple, "do this to save the world" message. Unfortunately, the plastic industry and its associated recycling industries are not only complicated, but they are changing all the time with developments in infrastructure and technology. They are also geographically determined – so where infrastructure for the recycling of one of the plastic codes might be available in one country, it is not necessarily available in another country or city – yet.

PETCO and IOI-SA gathered together some plastic experts to try unpack some of the myths and mysteries around these issues in a panel discussion that was open to the public and media. The discussion took place on the 12th of March 2020 - in the short space between panic buying of hand sanitiser and events with more than 50 people no longer being allowed. The experts included Peter Ryan (University of Cape Town), Douw Steyn (Plastics|SA), Aaniyah Omaidien (The Beach Co-op), Anthony Ribbink (Sustainable Seas Trust), Alison Davison (City of Cape Town), Suzan Oelofse (CSIR), Cheri Scholtz (PETCO) and Chandru Wadhvani (Extrupet). The discussion was facilitated by IOI-SA Director, Adnan Awad. The panellists were asked to highlight some of the plastic myths that they have come across and what message they would like the audience to take home.





One of the recurring themes that came through from many of the panellists is that plastic isn't bad in itself, it is how we deal with it that can be a problem. This is from the level of manufacturers who could do more to design for recycling or reuse, to the consumers who can take more responsibility for what they choose to buy and how they dispose of waste. The one thing that is difficult to get away from is that the plastic industry, including its recovery, recycling and waste management, is part of the economic model of the country. Therefore, when the oil price is low, the price of virgin material is low and there is less incentive for manufacturers to use recycled material – that is, unless there is consumer pressure for manufacturers to use recycled plastic or companies to choose to be responsible. In some countries the decision has been made to tax manufacturers that don't include at least 30% recycled content in their packaging products¹.

The panel highlighted that there is still work to be done in this field, from research on where plastic ends up and what mitigation methods are effective, to developing infrastructure and designing products for a more circular economy. This work is underway as well as work on how to improve people's perceptions around littering and responsible plastic use, and improving the rate of recycling and the types of plastics that can be recycled. This is also determined by economic pressures, so it is important for municipalities, government, business and industry to work together and to work across different waste streams to maximise efficiency and buffer changes in prices for recyclables. In some countries, there has also been a change in legislation that defines "polluter" to include the brand owner, retailer and producer which is an economic incentive for industry to change.

It was clear from the audience questions that there is a lot of confusion around plastic alternatives that are advertised as biodegradable or compostable. There are no standards in place for these products and the labelling isn't always clear on whether home composting or industrial composting will work. There is a working group that is working towards developing industry specifications for these products, but until they are in place, they might not be the best alternative to plastic. For some people, they create the mistaken impression that it is OK to leave these products in the environment but many of these products will not decompose in the nature environment and could, in fact, just end up adding to microplastic in the environment as they break in to smaller pieces but do not biodegrade. They are also difficult to distinguish from plastic that is recyclable which is problematic for collectors. There are no large scale facilities in South Africa to deal with the conditions required for PLA to biodegrade and until there is, they add costs to composting that is otherwise free. There are also potential conflicts associated with agricultural land being used for the growth of bioplastics made from staple foods (e.g. corn, cassava etc.) that could otherwise be used for improving food security.

¹ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/introduction-of-plastic-packaging-tax/plastic-packaging-tax>

The audience hoped for a clear voice or source of information on plastics and the recycling industry. The panel were able to point them in the direction of The National Recycling Forum (<https://www.recycling.co.za/>) which has information on recycling of all materials including plastics, glass and paper. Plastics|SA's website (<https://www.plasticsinfo.co.za/>) and PETCO's website (<https://petco.co.za/>) include information on recycling, clean-ups, bioplastics and other resources. The African Marine Waste Network (<https://africanwastenetwork.org.za/>) has committed to answering your questions and creating a one stop source of information. It was also noted that there is work being done to improve transparency with clear on product recycling labelling, this changes with changes in technology and economic drivers (<https://www.plasticrecyclingsa.co.za/>).

The behind the scenes work to improve recovery, recycling and efficiency continues from supporting collectors in rural areas, to working with large brand owners to be more responsible. Food trays that are notoriously not recycled can now be recycled into fibre and certain Thermoform producers have recently joined PETCO to work on this. Another example is The South African Plastic Pact (<https://www.saplasticspact.org.za/>) – an exciting new initiative from a number of retailers, manufacturers and NGOs to tackle plastic pollution and unnecessary production. GreenCape is the secretariat of the initiative.

SA Plastics Pact Goals – by 2025

- Taking action on problematic or unnecessary plastic packaging through redesign, innovation or alternative (re-use) delivery models.
- 100% of plastic packaging to be reusable, recyclable or compostable
- 70% of plastic packaging effectively recycled
- 30% average post-consumer recycled content across all plastic packaging



Adnan Awad (IOI-SA Director) reminded the audience of Peter Ryan's comment that plastics are not the biggest threat to the ocean or the environment but a symptom of over population and consumerism. Plastic pollution, however, is something we can all work together to fix. It is also a way to draw the general public into conversations about what the biggest threats to the ocean and the environment are, from climate change to overfishing or unsustainable agricultural practices. People that are concerned about plastic pollution can also examine their lifestyles to see how else they are impacting on the world. Only through concerted effort and society, industry and government working together, will we be able to change the amount of plastic entering our environment. This is something we all need to take responsibility for – much like flattening the curve in the time of COVID-19.



Ending Plastic Pollution in South Africa by 2020: Fact or Fiction. PETCO and IOI-SA Event

IOI-SA and PETCO are committed to continuing the conversation around plastics and bringing people information that they want to know. To this end, we sent a survey out after the event to try understand what the audience would like to know more about and whether there is an appetite for more panels like this in future. Some of the suggestions that were received from the survey are outlined below:

- *Greenwashing. What does it look like in the recycling business.*
- *Updates on and details on biodegradables/compostable/biomaterials - potential in the materials and challenges*
- *I would love to see a concerted and focused media campaign to debunk the myths about plastic use and - specifically in the food industry.*
- *The majority of responsibility and power does NOT rest with the consumer. How can we, the consumer, better communicate with Business and share what it is we want to consume?*