

BBC Learning English

6 Minute English

Plastic Pollution

NB: This is not an accurate word-for-word transcript



Dan: Hello and welcome 6 Minute English from the BBC. I'm Dan Walker Smith and today I'm joined by Kate.

Kate: Hello Dan.

Dan: Now today Kate and I are talking about **pollution**.

Kate: Yes, well **pollution** is the term for harmful waste which has been put into the environment, and which can be damaging to plants and animals.

Dan: So I'm going to start the show today with a question, Kate; have you ever heard of the '**Great Pacific Garbage Patch**'?

Kate: No, I'm afraid I haven't; I've never heard of that.

Dan: Well let me explain: **Garbage** is an American word for something we've thrown away. What we in the UK might call **rubbish**. And the **Pacific Garbage Patch** is an area of the Pacific Ocean where rubbish has collected. It was discovered in 1997, and is essentially a big floating soup of plastic **garbage** and bits of **rubbish** that have been thrown away on land and have ended up in the sea.

Kate: Ooh that sounds absolutely horrible. I had no idea that anything like that existed.

Dan: Well this is the bit which is really scary: we don't actually know the size of the garbage patch, but some people say it could be 600,000 square miles across – which is twice the size of France.

Kate: What? Twice the size of France? That's absolutely huge!

Dan: And it could be bigger.

Kate: That's very frightening.

Dan: So this week's question for you Kate is: According to the United Nations, how many pieces of plastic are there in each square kilometre of the world's oceans? Is it:

- a) 22,000 pieces of plastic
- b) 38,000
- c) 46,000

Kate: Well, as I'd never heard of this problem before, I'm going to take a wild guess and, sadly, I think I'm going to guess the top number; 46,000 pieces of plastic.

Dan: OK, well they're all pretty big, but we'll see if you're right at the end of the programme.

Kate: Now plastic pollution in the seas kills over a million sea birds and 100,000 mammals and turtles each year.

Dan: So here's the Dutch marine biologist Jan van Franeker talking about the effects of plastic pollution on birds. You'll hear the word **litter**, which is another word for rubbish. So what sort of **litter** have the scientists found in birds' stomachs?

Extract 1

Worldwide, there's so many bird species that have litter in their stomachs. It varies from pieces from bottles or toys, parts from fishing nets, from ropes. Any sort of plastic really that is broken up and is floating around the ocean.

Kate: OK, so the plastics they're finding aren't just things that might have been thrown into the sea, like fishing nets and ropes, but are actually things that have come from the land, like pieces of bottles and children's toys.

Dan: Apparently 80% of all the plastic found in the ocean is actually **litter** that's been thrown away on land.

Kate: And part of the problem is that most plastics aren't **biodegradable**. What does the word **biodegradable** mean Dan?

Dan: Well, if something **biodegrades** it means it breaks down naturally. So if a product isn't **biodegradable** it won't decompose or decay organically. And some plastic bags could last in the environment for up to a thousand years.

Kate: Let's hear the marine ecologist Richard Thompson talking about plastic **packaging**. **Packaging** is the protective covering used to transport products and display a company's image. So let's have a listen to the extract: what percentage of plastic produced each year is used for packaging?

Extract 2

I think we need to think very very carefully about the way that we use plastics in society. If we think that 100 million tonnes of plastic products are made every year, 40% of those are packaging materials that are mainly used once and then discarded.

Dan: OK, so 40% of the world's plastic is used as **packaging** material and then **discarded**. Can you explain what **discarded** means Kate?

Kate: Sure: well to **discard** something means to throw it away. So if the **packaging** is **discarded**, it means that people throw it away as **rubbish** or **litter**, rather than use it again.

Dan: To lower the amount of plastic waste, scientists recommend the '**three Rs**' for packaging. We can **reduce** the amount of packaging used on products; we can **re-use** packaging more than once, and we can **recycle** the materials used.

Kate: And **recycle** means to process used materials into new products. So you can **recycle** old glass, paper and plastic products to make something new. Do you **recycle**, Dan?

Dan: I'm actually very lucky, because where I live in London has a great recycling programme. So essentially every week we've got someone who comes round and collects all the paper and all the plastic and all the glass that I've used that entire week, which is fantastic.

Kate: Oh that sounds great, you're really lucky. Actually I've got the same thing: I have all my plastics and glass picked up outside my house, so I think certain places in the UK are doing quite well on the recycling front.

Dan: And even if you can't recycle, just try and reuse or reduce the amount of waste that you're going to be producing.

OK, we're almost out of time, so let's go over some of the vocabulary we've come across today:

pollution

garbage

rubbish

litter

biodegradable

packaging
to discard
to recycle

Dan: And finally Kate, let's go back to today's question. I asked you at the beginning of the show how many pieces of plastic there are in each average square kilometre of the ocean?

Kate: And I went for c, 46,000.

Dan: Well, depressingly Kate, you're right. There are apparently 46,000 pieces of plastic, on average, in each square kilometre of the ocean.

Kate: What? 46,000 pieces of plastic? That's absolutely incredible! How sad, and think of the damage that must be doing to the sea life.

Dan: But, hopefully, if we all try and reduce waste, and use less packaging, and recycle more, then maybe things will get better.

So from all of us here at BBC Learning English, thanks for listening, and goodbye!

Kate: Goodbye!