

This Killed a Whale and It's Lurking Inside Your Body

Analysis by [Dr. Joseph Mercola](#)

✓ Fact Checked

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STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- › Plastic pollution is one of the greatest challenges we face, as the world produces more than 381 million tons of plastic annually, while an estimated 8 million pieces make its way into the ocean each day
- › An investigation explored food packaging as one of the greatest sources of global plastic pollution
- › Two of Canada's largest supermarkets are big plastic polluters, as they source products from suppliers that overuse plastic in food packaging; neither grocer has any major plans to reduce plastic pollution
- › The investigation shows how difficult it is to buy plastic-free when shopping at major grocers; however, one U.K. grocery went plastic-free in 10 weeks, and their profits increased
- › Western nations are shipping their plastic waste to be recycled in poorer countries with fewer environmental regulations on how it's processed and disposed of

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The looming threat of plastic pollution is one of mankind's greatest challenges. With more than 381 million tons of plastic produced worldwide each year,¹ it's no surprise the waste ends up in our soil, lakes, rivers and oceans, as well as in the bodies of humans and wildlife.

The durability of plastic is what makes it popular for use in so many products. But its strength and durability also mean that it doesn't break down in the environment. It's estimated that a plastic bottle can take 450 years to break down in a marine environment,² while fishing line can take 600 years.³ But even then, it never goes away. It simply breaks down into smaller pieces that may persist in the environment forever.

These tiny pieces of plastic, commonly known as microplastics, may be eaten by fish and other marine life. This can cause a lot of suffering if the plastic builds up in their bodies over time. When a whale found malnourished and dying off the coast of Norway had to be put down, an autopsy revealed 30 plastic bags and a large amount of plastic packaging waste in its stomach and intestines, which was causing blockages and pain.⁴

Microplastics that bioaccumulate in the food chain and are eventually consumed by humans (the average person ingests about 100 plastic particles each year from shell fish alone) can cause a lot of health problems in people, too. As in the environment, plastic does not break down in the human body, either.

Many of the chemicals used in the manufacture of plastics are also known to disrupt embryonic development, dysregulate hormones and gene expression, cause organ damage, and have been linked to obesity, heart disease and cancer.

One of the greatest sources of plastic pollution is single-use plastic found in food packaging. An investigation by CBC News Marketplace explored the role supermarkets play in fueling plastic pollution, as the majority of food products are continually wrapped in toxic, nonbiodegradable plastic packaging.⁵

Why Buying Plastic-Free Is so Difficult

The featured film highlights two families and their attitude toward plastic (one family tries to avoid it; one doesn't) when it comes to buying food. The two families agree to participate in a social experiment where they switch places to see how the other side lives when it comes to addressing plastic pollution.

About 95% of what we buy contains some form of plastic packaging, says Jessica and Jonathan, who have an infant child name JJ. The couple live in the north end of Toronto, Canada, where they shop at No Frills, a discount grocery chain owned by Loblaw Inc., a Canadian supermarket chain with stores located in the provinces of British Columbia, Alberta, Ontario and Quebec.

The film follows the family up and down the aisles of their local No Frills grocery store as they shop for food, paying particular attention to how much of it comes packaged in plastic. The couple, who grocery shop about twice a week, say they used to use reusable bags, but don't anymore. "We never bring reusable bags," says Jessica. "We did before. But then we just stopped" says Jonathan. "We got lazy," says Jessica.

Western Nations Dump Their Plastics on Poorer Countries

Plastic is cheaper and more convenient, say the couple. And they're right. Supermarkets and their suppliers have come to rely on plastic because it's cheap and durable. But "cheap" is relative. The true cost of single-use plastic on human and environmental health is astronomical, and the burden of that cost is unevenly distributed.

Some of the world's largest plastic producers often ship their waste to other countries to be recycled. Both the U.S. and Canada, as well as several other countries, were shipping large portions of plastic waste to China, which would buy it, recycle it and make new products. But last year China announced that it would no longer accept plastic waste imports in an effort to protect the environment and human health.

Since 1991, nearly half the world's plastic waste has been sent to China.⁶ Since China decided it no longer wanted to be the "world's garbage dump,"⁷ experts say there may be an estimated 111 million tons of plastic with nowhere to go by 2030. The U.S., Britain, Germany, Japan and Mexico were among some of the largest exporters of plastic waste to China.⁸

Instead of dealing with their own waste, many Western nations have been dumping (literally) their plastic problem on to other countries with little to no environmental

regulations on how that waste is processed and disposed of. In the first six months of China banning plastic waste imports, nearly half of plastic waste exported from the U.S. for recycling was shipped to Thailand, Malaysia and Vietnam. John Hocevar, Oceans campaign director for Greenpeace USA, says:

"Instead of taking responsibility for their own waste, U.S. companies are exploiting developing countries that lack the regulation to protect themselves. The average person when they put a piece of plastic in a [recycling] bin, they assume it is being recycled, not being shipped to China or now to Southeast Asia, where it will possibly be incinerated or landfilled."

The film shows exclusive footage provided to CBS News Marketplace by Greenpeace of heaping piles of plastic waste in Malaysia.

The footage was taken about an hour outside of Malaysia's capital, Kuala Lumpur. Hidden within the mounds of plastic waste is plastic trash from some of Canada's popular stores and grocers, including a bag from Sobeys, a milk bag from Nova Scotia dairy Scotsburn, a burger bun bag from Ben's Bakery and a birdseed bag from a company in Ontario.

The most ironic part about Canadian companies dumping their trash abroad in places like Malaysia is that nothing about their marketing suggests they are participating in such an environmentally destructive practice.

One of Sobeys' most popular commercials drives home the slogan, "Delivering you the future." One of Scotsburn's advertisements says, "Our products meet our family." These feel-good (and misleading) slogans convince consumers they care about people and their health. But that isn't exactly the case.

Consumers Need More Plastic-Free Choices in Supermarkets

The film goes back to showing the two families that agreed to switch places to see how the other side lives when it comes to addressing plastic pollution. Sofia, Nick and their

daughter, Lyla, also from Toronto, do their best to live a zero-waste lifestyle. They try to be mindful about the waste they generate on a daily basis.

Sofia shops for food once a week and in local grocers that support zero waste and offer food in bulk. She consciously tries to reduce their waste by using cloth bags for produce and reusable bags and other containers to store food. The lifestyle swap is difficult on Sofia as she finds herself extremely anxious over having to buy food packaged in plastic.

Jessica and Jonathan, tasked with buying food that's not wrapped in plastic, have an even more difficult time. When it comes to purchasing milk for their infant child, the couple notices they have to buy more milk because it comes in smaller packaging, yet it's also more expensive. Both families agree they need more plastic-free options. So why aren't grocers providing it?

Major retailers like Loblaw are part of the problem, which means they are part of the solution, too. Rather than criticize them for what they are doing, CBC News Marketplace reached out to Loblaw and Sobeys and asked what they plan to do to reduce plastic packaging.

Neither retailer was very forthcoming. Sobeys never issued a comment, and Loblaw directed them to its corporate social responsibility report, which made no mention of any plans to reduce plastic packaging. CBC News Marketplace contacted both retailers several more times, but both refused to meet and discuss plastic waste. However, they did find a grocer who would talk, one who could be an example for supermarkets everywhere.

The film arrives in London, England, at a local grocery chain called Thornton's Budgens. Similar to Canada, not a lot of plastic waste gets recycled in the U.K., according to the film. But consumers are growing increasingly more concerned about environmentally friendly packaging than the price — and stores are starting to listen.

Budgens, one of the first in the world to introduce plastic-free zones, has more than 2,000 products without plastic packaging. Even more impressive is that the store made

the change in just 10 short weeks.

The good news is that in 2022 both Sobeys and Loblaw are addressing the plastics issue. In January 2020, 255 Sobeys stores completely eliminated single-use plastic bags at their checkouts.⁹ This alone eliminated 225 million plastic bags from circulation each year, Sobeys' website says. They also have implemented strategies to eliminate other types of plastics, including Styrofoam, from their stores.

Loblaw established a committee¹⁰ to review plastic initiatives after the film came out and has promised to make all PC product plastic packaging reusable or recyclable by 2025. They also are donating \$1 million toward plastics research, among other initiatives.

Local UK Grocer Goes Plastic-Free in 10 Weeks

The owner of Thornton's Budgens, Andrew Thornton, said they decided to act against plastic pollution simply because they could.

"If we as one store operator, with very little resources, can do this in 10 weeks, what could a Loblaws do if they put all their resources behind it? We are trashing the planet, and to me, plastic has become a symbol of one of the things that's wrong with society today. So we took action because we could. We felt we could make a difference."

The products affected by the store's plastic ban include everything from fresh produce to eggs, fish, bread, cheese and packaged foods. The store even sells plastic-free bacon that's packaged in paper and uses a plant-based cellulose film as an alternative to plastic. It looks and acts like plastic, but it's not and it's biodegradable, meaning you can put it with your food or garden waste and it will go back into the Earth and fertilize the soil.

Not only is Budgens helping curb plastic waste, but it's making more money, too. "We didn't set out to do it for commercial reasons, but there is a commercial benefit," said Thornton. To achieve its goal, the store worked with Frankie Gillard of the environmental

group A Plastic Planet. She says that big supermarkets have the power to get major brands to switch to more sustainable packaging methods.

"You basically say, 'We're going to delist your product otherwise.' They have the power to make or break a brand. So, of course, they have the power to say how it should be packaged."

Loblaw and Sobeys Refuse to Talk Plastic Waste

Since neither Loblaw nor Sobeys were very forthcoming about their position on plastic waste. CBC News Marketplace set up shop outside one of the retailers' locations in Toronto to launch a different kind of swap. They approached shoppers as they were leaving the store and asked them to do an audit of their purchases.

They find a lot of plastic packaging. Most of the items in all of the shopper's bags were packaged in plastic: bread, cheese, sushi, meat and fruit. The film crew swaps out all of the plastic for more environmentally friendly packaging, putting cookies in glass jars, produce in cloth bags and fruit and meat in glass containers.

The film crew was able to fill two large garbage bags full of plastic by intercepting the purchases of just seven Loblaw shoppers. The result was similar at Sobeys. Customers at both Loblaw and Sobeys told CBC News Marketplace that they want more options for buying plastic-free, and they want major retailers to take action to make it possible.

Loblaw did eventually issue a statement listing "incremental changes" it has made so far, including selling single-serve, compostable coffee pods, removing microbeads from their own brand personal care products and making customers pay for plastic bags.

The more awareness raised about plastic pollution, the more companies are moving to change. A string of companies, including Unilever, Nestlé and PepsiCo, recently announced they are introducing reusable packaging for certain products in an effort to phase out single-use plastic. Vox.com reports:¹¹

"Starting in May, Unilever's Axe and Dove deodorants will come in refillable steel containers that are expected to last eight years.

PepsiCo will start selling Tropicana orange juice in glass bottles and certain flavors of Quaker cereal in steel containers. Häagen-Dazs, owned by Nestlé, will come in refillable stainless steel tins. Procter & Gamble's Pantene shampoo will come in aluminum bottles, and its Tide brand detergent will come in stainless steel containers."

The move is important because if we really want to curb plastic pollution, we need to stop using it – and not just keep hoping that it gets recycled.

Only a Small Portion of Plastic Gets Recycled

Plastics can, and should, be recycled, but a 2017 analysis¹² revealed a staggering 91% weren't. As reported by National Geographic:¹³

"Mass production of plastics, which began just six decades ago, has accelerated so rapidly that it has created 8.3 billion metric tons – most of it in disposable products that end up as trash. If that seems like an incomprehensible quantity, it is. Even the scientists who set out to conduct the world's first tally of how much plastic has been produced, discarded, burned or put in landfills, were horrified by the sheer size of the numbers ...

Of the 8.3 billion metric tons that has been produced, 6.3 billion metric tons has become plastic waste. Of that, only 9 percent has been recycled. The vast majority – 79 percent – is accumulating in landfills or sloughing off in the natural environment as litter. Meaning: At some point, much of it ends up in the oceans, the final sink."

The film ends with a powerful message to the supermarkets. Sofia, a member of the family that's conscious about plastic waste, said companies should listen to what their customers want. "I'm supporting your business. Support my values," she said. To learn

more on how to reduce plastic waste, check out trashisfortossers.com for a beginner's guide to zero waste living.¹⁴

What's alarming is that in 2022, despite efforts to encourage more recycling, the rates actually have gone to an abysmal 6%. As reported by The Washington Post May 4, 2022:

“Drawing on the most recent EPA data available and last year’s plastic-waste exports, the new report estimates that Americans recycled 5 to 6 percent of their plastics, down from the 8.7 percent in 2018. But the real figure could be even lower, it added, given factors such as the plastic waste collected for recycling that is ‘sent to cement kilns and burned.’”

Per person, this averages out to a whopping 287 pounds every year. As a result, “Plastics production is on track to unleash more emissions than coal-fired power plants by the end of the decade,” the Post said.

“At the current rate of emissions, the world will **burn through** its remaining “carbon budget” by 2030 – putting the ambitious goal of keeping warming to 1.5 degrees Celsius (2.7 degrees Fahrenheit) irrevocably out of reach.” If you want to take action to reduce plastic pollution, here are a few tips:

- Bring your own reusable bags to the store when you go to the store
- Shop for fresh foods and try to buy as few prepackaged foods as possible
- When dining out, bring your own take-home glass or metal containers
- Be an advocate for plastics reduction by refusing to purchase plastic products and by actively urging retailers to cut back or eliminate plastic packaging and bags

Sources and References

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