



THE UPDATE

Captain's Blog

Plastics - part of the problem and one we must solve

A report this week out of South Africa presented a very different take on ocean pollution.

Professor Peter Ryan of the University of Cape Town has published research in *New Scientist* that showed the large majority of the microfibres polluting our oceans are not plastic but natural fibres like cotton, wool, flax and linen.

It has long been plastics that have been painted as the culprit of ocean pollution and Ryan says his research in the Southern Ocean showed only eight percent of the pollution was plastic.

He further says that the argument that some five to 12 million tonnes of plastics were coming from the land to the sea was not borne out by his research and says a better estimate is between 250,000 and 300,000 tonnes.

Professor Ryan also says the plastics that are in the ocean are from countries that haven't adapted to cleaner fishing methods with the packaging that washed up on Pitcairn Island from New Zealand's seafood industry dating pre-2000 – and the most recent pollution from places like South America.

This is a comforting reminder that New Zealand is ahead of the curve in dealing with ocean pollution but a worrying sign that alternatives might be just as harmful.

The seafood industry wants to be a part of the solution and not a part of the problem.

Regulations in New Zealand have been crafted to reflect this understanding. Under the Resource Management (Marine Pollution) Regulations and the Maritime Transport Act 1994, it is unlawful for vessels to discharge plastics into the ocean anywhere at any time.

Large vessels over 400 tonnes are required to have a garbage management plan and a garbage record book. On these vessels it is also mandatory to record and report all lost fishing gear that could potentially pose a threat to the marine environment.

Seafood companies are conscious of the plastic pollution problem and are developing and implementing innovative and effective ways to reduce, reuse or recycle plastics in their operations.

Sanford, the largest New Zealand fishery and aquaculture business has a range of initiatives focused on marine plastic reduction, as a core element of their comprehensive sustainability programme.

Iwi-owned commercial fishing company Moana New Zealand have partnered with the World Wildlife Fund to ensure healthy valuable ecosystems for future generations. The use of single-use plastic products in packaging and supply chains is being reduced. Polybins, a polystyrene packaging component for much of the shipping and packaging processes, are being phased out and replaced with cardboard and other materials while remaining polybins are being recycled into photo frames.

Sealord has put in place programs to promote the practice of recycling land-based plastics. They have introduced a pouch recycling program where consumers can choose the recycling option for pouch packaging in tuna pockets and tuna express ranges. These pouches can be recycled into park benches, watering cans, and waste bins.

Professor Ryan says 80-100 percent of the plastics he tracked down rivers in his research washed ashore, so if beach and river mouth clean ups are regular it can have a big influence on how much plastic reaches the ocean.

The seafood industry organises and helps out at coastal clean-ups all around the country on a regular basis, taking away tonnes of plastic debris at their own cost.

This work goes largely unnoticed, but acknowledgment is not the reason for doing it.

A healthy ocean is essential to a healthy fishery.

We will be watching this latest research with interest.

If natural alternatives to plastics are themselves a problem, what is the solution?

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