

What happens to exported plastic?

Friends of the Earth conducted an investigation into what happened to exported plastic when it reached Indonesia.

The idea is that this plastic is processed into new plastic resin for new plastic products. However, evidence showed this plastic being picked and sorted by children, dumped in streets, washed into rivers, and being used for fuel in small factories, where the fumes can be harmful.



Interview with a Scientist

The consumer shouldn't be faced with this ethical challenge every time they go into the shop, of which type of packaging is better or worse than another.

“The products on the shelves in the supermarket, we as consumers ought to be able to rely on the packaging having the minimal environmental footprint necessary, and that that homework has been done for us, and that we are not faced with that challenge each time we go shopping as an individual.”

Professor Richard Thompson,
Director of the Marine Institute,
University of Plymouth

Deposit return scheme

A recycling scheme in Norway recycles 97% of plastic bottles. It is known as a deposit return scheme. Every time you buy a drink in a plastic bottle, or an aluminium can, you pay a little extra (about 10p to 25p depending on the size of the bottle).

When you have finished your drink, you return the bottle to a reverse vending machine. You put the bottle in and it gives you a coupon repaying the deposit in return. If the bottle is not empty and clean, the machine will accept the bottle, but give the coupon to the shopkeeper who will need to clean the bottle for you.



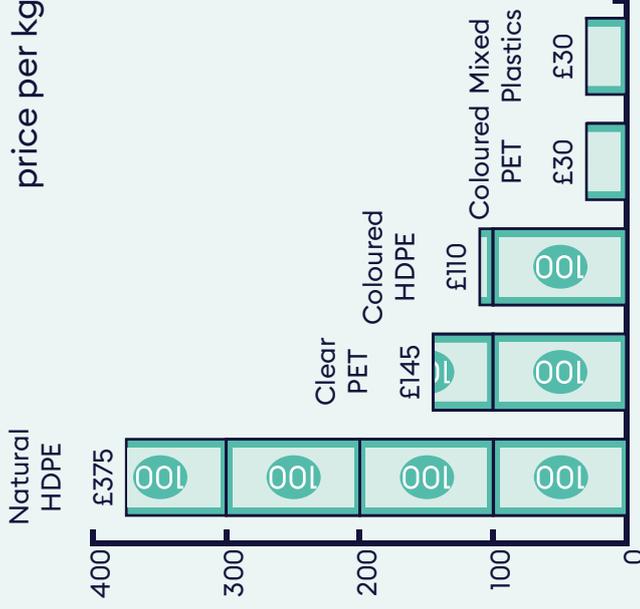
China bans plastic imports

Coming into effect on December 31, 2017, the import ban sought to crack down on plastics flooding into China, viewing it as a social and environmental hazard.

The report calculates that since 1992, China has imported 106 million tonnes of plastic waste, making up 45.1% of all imports worldwide, processing garbage from 43 countries on top of its own. China and Hong Kong have collectively taken in 72.4 % of all plastic waste.

Other countries in South East Asia carry out plastics recycling, but nowhere near the level of China. Recycling facilities in high-income regions such as Europe and North America are also thin on the ground.

Some plastics are worth more than others



HDPE is used to make milk bottles, and bottles for laundry detergent.

PET is used to make fizzy drinks and water bottles.

A green future: Our 25 year plan to improve the environment

In January 2018, the UK government set out a plan to reduce plastic waste. Measures included:

- Plastic bag charges of 5p to reduce the number of carrier bags in circulation
- Considering a deposit return, scheme for drinks containers, including plastic bottles
- Intention to ban the sale of plastic straws, drink stirrers and plastic-stemmed cotton buds

The UK has already banned the use of plastic microbeads in cosmetics.



Plastic peppers

Media reports have shown that it is more expensive for consumers to buy certain fruit and vegetable items singly rather than in plastic packets.

For three major supermarkets in the UK, the price comparison for three peppers bought singly and three bought packaged together in plastic were:

Sainsbury's:

3 plastic peppers: £1.50
3 loose peppers: £1.10

Tesco:

3 plastic peppers: £1.65
3 loose peppers: £1.29

Asda:

3 plastic peppers: £1.65
3 loose peppers: £1.29

Figures derived from like for like peppers on offer on respective supermarket websites on 2 July 2019.



UK 'Plastic Pact'

On 26 April 2018, a number of UK supermarkets, food companies and plastics' industry members launched a new voluntary pledge, a 'plastic pact' to cut plastic packaging. It includes an aspiration that by 2025 all plastic packaging can be reused, recycled or composted.

There has been some criticism of the pact in the press as it is a voluntary measure, with no enforcement mechanisms.

UK headlines since Jan 2018 include:

- UK supermarkets launch voluntary pledge to cut plastic packaging
- Drinks bottles and can deposit return scheme proposed
- Coconut controversy as shoppers query use of plastic wrapping
- McDonald's aims for fully recycled packaging by 2025
- Coca-Cola pledges to recycle all packaging by 2030
- BBC to ban single-use plastics by 2020 after Blue Planet II

Does the China ban present an opportunity?

Simon Ellin, Chief executive of the UK Recycling Association warned that the ban could have severe consequences for council recycling in the UK, at least in the short term.

"If it no longer pays for our members to take this waste and sort it once it has been collected by councils then that might stop. That might mean that councils no longer collect recycling in the same way. It could be chaos."

Some experts believe that in the long term the decision by China could be an opportunity for the UK to develop its recycling infrastructure. Ellin agreed that if there was the political will this could be an opportunity.

"We need to look at the entire system from producing less, to better, simpler design, to standardised recycling."