Plastic Pollution



When people think about plastic, they may think of a range of everyday objects that serve to make our lives easier: containers in which to store food, toys and gadgets we play with and even the pipes that carry water to and from our homes. In fact, plastic is so popular in the UK today that it is almost impossible to imagine life without it.

However, while plastic makes human lives easier, it makes the lives of Britain's wildlife much harder and could be endangering the existence of some of our much-loved species.

Plastic Waste Facts

160,000 plastic bags are used around the world every second.





By 2015, 6300 million metric tonnes of plastic waste had been created.

79% of plastic produced over the last 70 years has been thrown away.



Of this:
9% recycled,
12% burned, 79% in landfills or the natural environment.



Plastic and the Environment

There are many different ways that plastic can enter the environment:

- not disposing of it properly, e.g. littering;
- washed down drains from face washes and clothing;
- spilled overboard by ships;
- escaped from factories and warehouses;
- blown out of bins or landfills by the wind;
- abandoned, e.g. fishing nets.

So much plastic enters the environment each year that it can be found in fresh water, soil, air and oceans around the world.

The Problem with Plastic

Although few forms of plastic can be classed as biodegradable – meaning that they will break down completely over time if exposed to the right conditions – most types of plastic are neither biodegradable nor compostable. Therefore, any plastic that ends up in the local environment will not break down over time, unlike paper, fruit peel or natural fabrics. They will simply remain indefinitely until they are removed by humans or mistakenly consumed by wildlife.

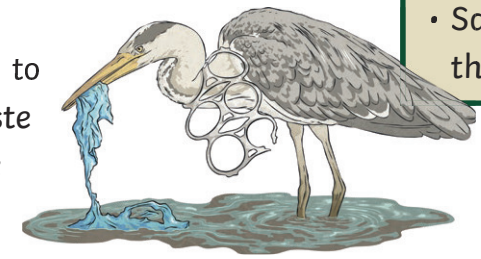
A huge problem with the plastic that ends up in the environment is the chemicals it releases. Over time, pieces of plastic litter will break into smaller pieces. When plastic breaks into tiny pieces, known as microplastics, it is consumed by wildlife that mistake it for food. Alarmingly, these microplastics contain toxic chemicals and heavy metals – poisonous and deadly to local wildlife. These make their way into the food chain, affecting not only the creature who ate the plastic but any animal that goes on to consume them.



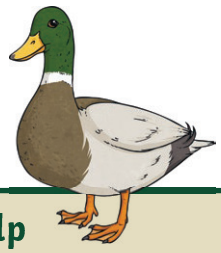
"Female Mallard By Water With Rubbish" by Martin Kessel

Threats to Wildlife

The largest threats to wildlife from plastic waste in the environment are:



- death or injury caused by becoming tangled in plastic waste, for example, birds becoming trapped in fishing nets or hedgehogs caught in plastic can holders;
- mistakenly eating plastic waste thinking that it is food, for example, birds eating plastic bags that float in a pond, mistaking them for fish;
- poisoning from the chemicals contained within the plastic which can lead to illness and death.



How We Can Help

The plastic problem we face today has not been created by one single place. It is a problem that has been created by every country and it is one which cannot be solved overnight. The key way to prevent any further harm to wildlife is by changing our attitude towards plastic. Some helpful tips are:

- Instead of using plastic items, such as straws and plastic bags, buy reusable items, e.g. Flasks for hot drinks and canvas shopping bags.
- Glitter (which is often made of plastic) and balloons can also be damaging to the environment and dangerous to animals, who may mistake them for food.
- Recycle as much of your waste as possible.
- Safely pick up litter you see in the environment.

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Questions

1. **...they will simply remain indefinitely until removed by humans...**
   Which of these is the most accurate definition for the word indefinitely? Tick one.

   - ○ globally problematic
   - ○ for the foreseeable future
   - ○ restricted from view
   - ○ negatively impactful

2. Match the sub-heading to the best summary of its contents.

Plastic and the Environment	A visual representation of facts and figures regarding plastic use and disposal.
Plastic Waste Statistics	An explanation of different ways plastic enters natural habitats.
Threats to Wildlife	An exploration of the damaging impact plastic pollution has on creatures and their habitats.

3. **...and could be endangering the existence of some of our much-loved species.**
   Define the word **endangering** based on its use in this sentence.

   _____

4. What percentage of plastic produced over the last 70 years has been thrown away?

   _____

5. Which creature may birds mistake plastic bags for?

   _____

6. Fully explain how plastic pollution endangers Britain's wildlife.

   _____

   _____

   _____

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7. Plastic pollution is a global problem. Propose three steps which could be taken globally to reduce plastic pollution.

8. Summarise what is meant by microplastics in 15 words or less.

9. Comment on one change you have already made and one change you will make in the future in order to reduce plastic pollution.

10. Summarise the purpose of this text and its intended audience.

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Answers

1. **...they will simply remain indefinitely until removed by humans...**
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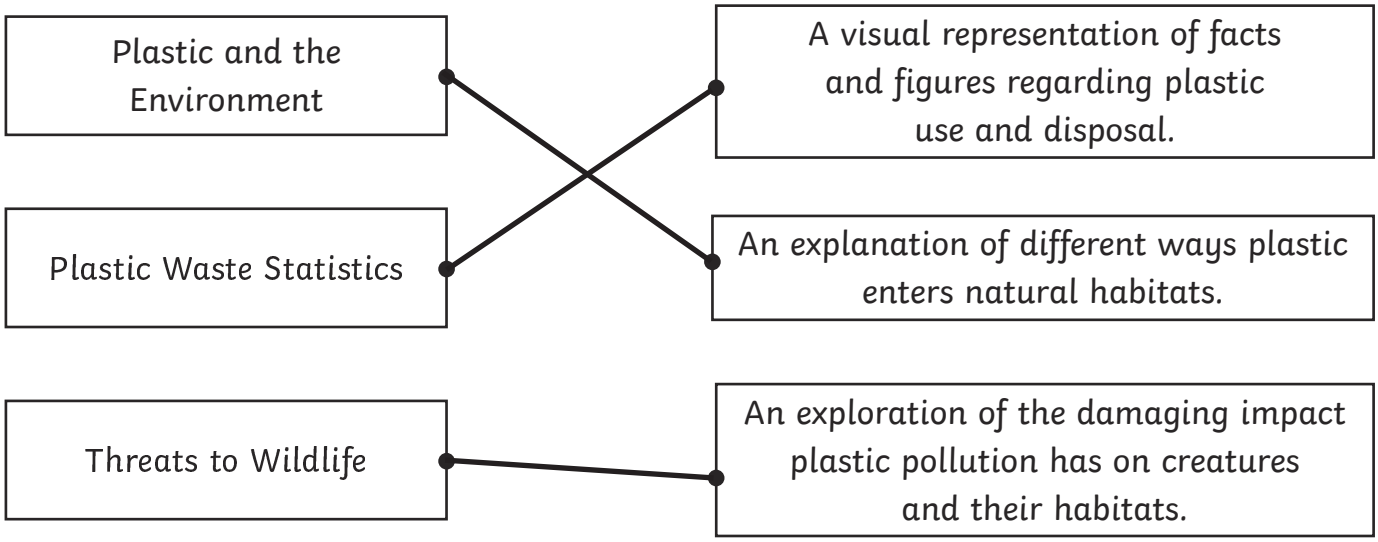
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3. **...and could be endangering the existence of some of our much-loved species.**
   Define the word **endangering** based on its use in this sentence.
   Pupils' own responses, such as: Endangering means putting something at risk or in danger.

4. What percentage of plastic produced over the last 70 years has been thrown away?
   79% of plastic produced over the last 70 years has been thrown away.

5. Which creature may birds mistake plastic bags for?
   Birds may mistake plastic bags for fish.

6. Fully explain how plastic pollution endangers Britain's wildlife.
   Pupils' own responses, such as: Plastic pollution can harm wildlife because creatures may become tangled in waste, eat the plastic by mistake and become poisoned by the chemicals in the plastic.

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7. Plastic pollution is a global problem. Propose three steps which could be taken globally to reduce plastic pollution.
   Pupils' own responses, such as: All single-use plastic items, such as straws and cutlery, could be banned globally. They could remove the use of plastic items and bottles from all international flights. Also, world leaders could meet to discuss measures to reduce plastic production and promote recycling.

8. Summarise what is meant by microplastics in 15 words or less.
   Pupils' own responses, such as: Microplastics are tiny pieces of plastic that have been broken down from larger pieces.

9. Comment on one change you have already made and one change you will make in the future in order to reduce plastic pollution.
   Pupils' own responses, such as: One change I have already made is that I have started refilling a water bottle instead of buying more bottled water. One change I will make in the future is that I will take my own bag to the supermarket instead of buying more plastic carrier bags.

10. Summarise the purpose of this text and its intended audience.
    Pupils' own responses, such as: I think that this text is intended for a young audience, especially children who are interested in wildlife and the environment. Its purpose is to inform them of the hazards of plastic pollution and to help them to make changes for the better to help the environment.

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