

A planet poisoned by plastic

‘From Hawaiian beaches to the coast of Britain, we’re paying a lethal price for our throwaway society.’ says TV adventurer Simon Reeve



Hawaii is generally considered to be the one place in the world where you should be able to guarantee finding paradise. The beautiful tropical islands have been used as the setting for countless TV series and films, ranging from *Lost* to *Jurassic Park*. Isolated in the middle of the vast Pacific Ocean, distance alone should protect Hawaii’s spectacular landscapes and turquoise sea from the environmental problems facing the rest of the planet.

So when I arrived in Hawaii, I was **staggered** to discover beaches covered in plastic rubbish washed up from around the world. **Pristine** sand was covered by old plastic toothbrushes, combs, shoes, belts and mouldings. Sam Gon, a Hawaiian conservationist, took me to one beach where 70 local volunteers were doing their best to remove tons of garbage. But as soon as it was cleaned, the waves **dumped** another mountain of rubbish.



The larger pieces of waste can be collected by hand. But when Sam and I dropped to our knees, I could see the surface of the beach was covered with millions of small plastic pellets, known as ‘nurdles’. These are the raw material that factories use to form the infinite number of plastic products that fill our lives. These are dumped out of factories into our seas in their trillions.

Yet the big shock came when Sam told me to dig into the sand. Plastic doesn’t biodegrade. Instead it breaks down into ever smaller pieces. Among the grains of sand were billions of tiny plastic **flecks**, which the pounding of the sea was reducing in size. As I dug through the plastic, I realised the sandy beach was being transformed into a plastic beach. A chill went down my spine.

From the beaches of Hawaii to the seas around Britain, we are **soiling** our own nest. It was a shock to realise how much British beaches have changed since I was a child playing on beautiful coastlines in Dorset and south Wales. Just like those in Hawaii, they are now covered in more litter than ever before.

Since 1994, plastic litter has increased by an extraordinary 121 per cent. The plastic we see on our beaches is just a fraction of the plastic waste that is **clogging** our oceans. Incredibly all the plastic ever created – totalling hundreds of millions of tons – is still out there in the environment in some form.

There are an estimated 600,000 plastic containers dumped overboard by ships every single day. In total, at least 100 million tons of plastic rubbish is thought to be sloshing around in our seas. The scale of the problem is extraordinary. The beaches I visited in Hawaii are being **swamped** by rubbish from the Great Pacific Garbage Patch, a vast accumulation of the world’s plastic debris floating in the Pacific Ocean. Twice the size of France, the Garbage Patch is like a plastic soup in the sea and is doubling in size each decade.



And it is not alone. Scientists believe that sea currents have created five vast **swirling** garbage patches in our oceans, including a huge one in the North Atlantic with up to 520,000 bits of rubbish per square mile. This is an international scandal and a global problem, for which we are all responsible.

‘Factories produced more plastic in the first decade of this 21st century than in the entire 20th century.’

From bicycle helmets to food packaging, from water bottles to toothbrushes, plastic makes our lives easier. But its production and use is completely out of control. ‘Factories produced more plastic in the first decade of this 21st century than in the entire 20th century.’

Because tiny fragments of plastic in our oceans are so small and look like food, they are being **gobbled** up by small fish, which in turn are eaten by larger fish – which in turn are eaten by us.

So plastic is ruining our beaches, choking the oceans, and poisoning our food chain. The consequences are still not fully understood, but they are likely to be devastating. We need to spurn and reject the main culprits: plastic bags, packaging and single-use water bottles, a wasteful obscenity. These make up the bulk of plastic garbage.

In Bangladesh, they have done away with plastic bags and replaced them with natural jute bags. If they can do it, so can we. England has recently joined the growing number of countries which **impose** a tax on plastic bags, and the small town of Modbury in Devon has banned them completely.

At stake is the future of beaches, our seas, and the food chain. It is nothing short of an environmental emergency.

