

"I want the next generation to grow up caring about nature."

As an aquarium volunteer, Shelby O'Neil, 17, learned firsthand how plastic can endanger marine life. So she did something about it.

I've always loved the ocean. In seventh grade, I started volunteering at the Monterey Bay Aquarium in California. I was really upset to learn that many sea animals eat plastic trash, thinking it's food.

I decided to do something to educate people about this problem. In 2017, I founded Jr Ocean Guardians as part of my work with the Girl Scouts. We hold presentations at schools to teach kids about plastic waste.

I wanted to reach businesses too. I decided if I learned of a company that used a lot of plastic, I'd send it an email urging it to cut back. *What's the worst that could happen if they don't respond?* I thought.

One day, I saw a commercial

for a health-care company. People in the ad were using plastic straws. I googled the contact info of the company and emailed its president. In my message, I told him how plastic can harm the environment. I asked him to consider using more sustainable options.

I was so excited when he wrote back! He said he had been thinking about reducing plastic waste. After reading my letter, he made sure the company cut its use of plastic straws, drink stirrers, and cup lids in half.

I kept going. Whenever I heard of businesses using plastic, I'd send an email. One of the biggest companies I



emailed was Alaska Airlines. A company representative wrote back and told me the airline was switching from plastic to paper stirrers on all of its 1,200 daily flights.

I always tell people: Everyone can make a change. Look for small things you can do because they add up.

by Shelby O'Neil, as told to Nell Durfee

In some countries—particularly certain island nations in Asia—that's a fact of life. They don't have reliable trash collection or properly maintained landfills. Instead, people leave their garbage in heaps on the ground or dump it into local waterways, where it eventually is swept out to sea. Experts estimate that 9 million tons of plastic end up in our oceans each year.

To make matters worse, people in these largely poor Asian nations have started using more single-serve packets of things like condiments, detergent, and shampoo. Many of them can't afford to buy bigger sizes. All that nonrecyclable plastic packaging only adds to the problem.

In the Philippines, for example, some rivers are now so clogged with trash that people can hop across the water on piles of discarded plastic rather than crossing by bridge.

How Plastic Kills

When plastic waste ends up in the ocean, the results are often tragic. Earlier this year, rescuers found a sick pilot whale near the shore of southern Thailand. It couldn't swim. In fact, it could hardly breathe.

Later, as veterinarians tended to the animal, it vomited five plastic grocery bags. The whale died shortly after. Tests eventually revealed that it had more than 17 pounds of plastic in its stomach, including another 80 or so plastic bags.

That's just one example of how plastic can be deadly to animals. Nearly 700 ocean species—from zooplankton and fish to sea turtles and dolphins—have been harmed by plastic. That damage ranges from eating it to getting stuck in it. For example, some animals get trapped in plastic six-pack drink holders. Others, including many bird species, →

18%
Percentage
of plastic
that is
recycled
around
the world

SOURCE:
National Geographic