



FACT SHEET

# Choked, Strangled, Drowned: THE PLASTICS CRISIS UNFOLDING IN OUR OCEANS

**In 2019, news outlets across the world reported on a beaked whale that died after ingesting more than 88 pounds of plastic.**

The whale had starved, and its digestive acid, unable to break down the compacted mass filling its stomach, had

begun eating away at the animal from the inside out. But not all incidents like this make the news.

Many tragedies in the ocean go unobserved, and the ones caused by plastic are no different. The plastics crisis is deep, wide and pervasive, affecting ecosystems and animals in ways we are only beginning to understand. In this report, Oceana has compiled for the first time the available data on plastic ingestion and entanglements in marine mammals and sea turtles in U.S. waters. This begins to paint a picture of an unfolding disaster: the flood of plastics into our oceans and the devastating impact it is having on marine life.

## Why It Matters

Marine mammals and sea turtles already face a plethora of problems: pollution, habitat loss and destruction, harmful or deadly encounters with commercial fishing gear, vessel strikes, illegal poaching, harmful algal blooms and a host of climate-driven changes, such as sea level rise and warming oceans, which can affect food supply and habitat. The added danger from plastic pollution is one more stressor these animals, especially the threatened and endangered ones, cannot afford to suffer.

If we do not reduce the amount of plastic flowing into the oceans, the problems documented here will get worse. Scientists now estimate that 15 million metric tons of plastic wash into the ocean every year. That equates to about two garbage trucks' worth of plastic entering the

ocean every minute. Plastic production is expected to grow at an alarming rate over the coming decades, and if nothing changes, the amount of plastic entering the ocean is projected to triple by 2040.

The struggling populations of threatened sea turtles and marine mammals cannot bear the harmful impacts posed by plastic, an often unnecessary material that's used for just a few moments before being discarded. This makes it an obvious target for policies aimed at reducing ocean pollution. The unnecessary production and use of non-medical single-use plastics is a habit we must break in order to prevent undue risks to endangered and threatened marine animals.



### Most Common Plastics Ingested

Bags, balloons, recreational fishing line, plastic sheeting and food wrappers



### Additional Items Involved in Entanglement or Ingestion

Bottle caps, beverage bottles, straws, plastic chairs, plastic forks, toothbrushes, plastic dental flosser, children's gliding toy, buckets, bubble wrap, sponges, swim goggles, plastic Easter grass, sandwich bags and polystyrene cups



### Most Common Plastics Entangling Animals

Plastic packing straps, bags and balloons with strings

## Recommendations

- Companies must reduce the production of plastic, especially unnecessary single-use plastic.
- Companies must offer consumers plastic-free choices.
- National, state and local governments must pass policies to reduce the production and use of single-use plastic.
- Companies and governments must move to establish widespread use of reusable and refillable containers and packaging.
- Federal agencies tasked with protecting endangered and threatened species and their habitats, including NOAA Fisheries and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, need to improve, standardize and require reporting of all plastic interaction cases.
- Congress must defend and fully fund implementation of the Endangered Species Act and the Marine Mammal Protection Act, laws that are vital to monitoring, maintaining and restoring the health of vulnerable marine animal populations.

**Help Oceana stop plastic pollution.** Take action at [usa.oceana.org/plastics](https://usa.oceana.org/plastics)

# Overall Findings

Oceana surveyed dozens of government agencies, organizations and institutions that collect data on the impact of plastic on marine mammals and sea turtles in the United States. We found evidence of almost 1,800 animals from 40 different species swallowing plastic or becoming entangled in it.

The biggest problem we found was animals consuming plastic. This happens because animals can mistake plastic for food or inadvertently swallow plastic while feeding or swimming. The result is that it can obstruct their digestion or lacerate their intestines, and all of this can interfere with their ability to feed and obtain the nourishment they need. These problems can lead to starvation and death.

Plastic entanglement also poses a deadly threat to marine life. When animals become entangled in plastics, they can drown, choke to death or suffer physical trauma, amputation and infection. Entanglement can also lead to malnutrition when it prevents the ability to feed properly.

The animals reflected in this report are far fewer than the true number of sea turtles and marine mammals that consume or become entangled in plastic in U.S. waters. Not every animal is reported to a stranding network, and not every animal is found or reported to authorities after it dies.



## Key Findings



- Of the 1,792 animals that swallowed or became entangled in plastic, 861 were sea turtles (including all six U.S. species) and 931 were marine mammals (from 34 different species).
- Eighty-eight percent of the nearly 1,800 animals were species listed as endangered or threatened with extinction under the Endangered Species Act.
- From 2009 to 2018, there were, on average, 170 observed instances of plastics impacting marine mammals and sea turtles every year.
- Plastics affected animals at all life stages, from recently hatched sea turtles to seal mothers with actively nursing pups.
- Some sea turtle groups consumed plastic up to three times more often than average for their species.
- Some marine mammals, such as the northern fur seal, consumed plastic up to 50 times more often than average for eared seals.
- In the cases where plastic ingestion was the likely cause of or contributor to death, seven involved just one piece of plastic.
- Plastics ranged in size and type, from microplastics that were perforating the gastrointestinal tract of a baby sea turtle, to DVD cases and huge plastic sheets that had been swallowed by whales.

# Examples of Plastic's Dangerous Impact on Marine Life

How to Report Marine Animals in Distress →

Find the local animal stranding organization in your area by visiting the NOAA Fisheries website:

[fisheries.noaa.gov/report](https://fisheries.noaa.gov/report)

## WASHINGTON:

A Guadalupe fur seal was found dead with an 8-inch piece of plastic lodged inside its stomach.



## OREGON:

A harbor seal with a nursing pup had a packing strap tightly entangled around her neck.



## CALIFORNIA:

A long-beaked common dolphin was found with a food wrapper lodged in its esophagus.



## HAWAII:

An endangered Hawaiian monk seal was discovered with a plastic water bottle stuck on its snout.

## TEXAS:

An emaciated Kemp's ridley sea turtle was found struggling in the surf and died the next day in rehab, potentially from the plastic in its gut.

## FLORIDA:

A Florida manatee likely died from the plastic bag, straw, string, pantyhose and fishing line filling its stomach and colon.

## MAINE:

Scientists examining a dead leatherback sea turtle found that plastic sheeting in its gastrointestinal tract potentially contributed to its death.

## MASSACHUSETTS:

A dead leatherback sea turtle was discovered with a sandwich bag, candy wrapper and plastic packaging inside its belly.

## NEW YORK:

A Risso's dolphin was found with several single-use plastic bags and a black construction bag in its gastrointestinal tract.

## DELAWARE:

A young, emaciated pilot whale was found dead with shredded instant-ramen noodle bags in its gut.

## VIRGINIA:

A female sei whale swallowed a DVD case, which lacerated her stomach and led to gastric ulcers, harming her ability to find food.

## NORTH CAROLINA:

A bottlenose dolphin was found with a child's plastic ring toy entangled around its head.

## SOUTH CAROLINA:

A loggerhead sea turtle defecated almost 60 pieces of plastic during its rehabilitation.

## GEORGIA:

A loggerhead sea turtle had a woven plastic bag running down its gastrointestinal tract, from its throat through the stomach and into the intestines.

Note: Not all photos are cases described on the map.

Photo credits from left to right: 1. Kristal Talbot 2. NOAA Fisheries 3. Clearwater Marine Aquarium 4. Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission 5. New York Marine Rescue Center

# #PlasticFreeSeas

For Oceana's full report and references,  
please visit: [usa.oceana.org/ChokingOnPlastic](https://usa.oceana.org/ChokingOnPlastic)

Photo Credit: David Jones/ Just One Ocean

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World's Oceans

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