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“Waste is everyone’s problem and everyone’s responsibility.”

~ The Pacific Regional Litter Action Plan

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ISOLATED PACIFIC ISLAND VICTIM OF PLASTIC POLLUTION

Henderson Island, one of the remote Pitcairn Islands in the South Pacific, has UNESCO World Heritage Site Status. It is uninhabited by humans and was believed to be one of the few remaining pristine environments on Earth, until visited by a team of scientists in 2015. The scientists found the island’s three beaches covered in rubbish, and estimated there were 38 million pieces of plastic.

A second trip by scientists to Henderson Island in 2019 found that the amount of plastic on the beaches had increased in four years, and the researchers estimated that there were over four billion pieces of micro and nano plastic in the top five centimetres of sand alone.

The island lies in the South Pacific Gyre, a system of swirling ocean currents, stretching from east of Australia to west of South America, north to the Equator and south to the Antarctic Circumpolar Current. Marcus Eriksen, environmental scientist and co-founder of the non-profit organisation, the 5 Gyres Institute, discovered the South Pacific Garbage Patch in 2011, which he describes as like a “plastic smog”, as the most of the garbage he found was not made of big pieces, but masses of tiny plastic particles.

In 2016, Charles Moore, the founder of Algalita, a non-profit organisation for studying plastic pollution in the ocean, set out from California with a team to ascertain the size and shape of the South Pacific Garbage Patch, and find out what sort of rubbish it contained. They discovered that it stretched from 1,100 kilometres off the coast of Chile to Easter Island, covering an area of 3 million square kilometres.

Charles Moore, discovered the more well-known Great Pacific Garbage Patch, in the North Pacific Gyre between California and Hawaii, in 1997. He found the rubbish in the South Pacific Garbage Patch was slightly different – more fishing lines, probably because of the fishing activity in the region. Mostly like its northern counterpart it contained innumerable pieces of microplastic, but even smaller pieces than in the Great Pacific Garbage Patch. Charles Moore described it as like “plastic dust on the ocean”.

The UK’s Pew Charitable Trust estimates that about 11 million tonnes of plastic end up in our oceans every year, and that amount is believed to nearly triple by 2040 due to increased global population, increased plastic production and because 25% of the world’s population lack access to waste collection systems.

In 1950 plastic production was 2 million tonnes a year, and it reached 348 million tonnes in 2017. Also, 95% of plastic packaging is single use. Although 71% of plastic produced is collected after use, and that doesn’t not include what is collected by informal waste pickers, less than 15% is recycled. The Pew Charitable Trusts and SYSTEMIQ, a London-based sustainability consultancy, through their research have found a scenario which involves changing plastic design, production, sale, use, disposal and recycling could reduce the annual flow of plastic waste into the ocean by about 80% by 2040. This change would mostly be driven by action by governments and industry leaders.

The Dutchman Boyan Slat had only just graduated from high school when he conceived of an idea to clean up the plastic in the ocean. In 2013 he founded the Ocean Cleanup. Since then the organisation has been developing technology to remove plastic from the ocean, and in 2021 the Ocean Cleanup’s U-shaped net system rubbish-collecting prototype collected 9 tonnes of plastic from the Great Pacific Garbage Patch. Also, Ocean Cleanup is developing technology which catches plastic in rivers before it reaches the oceans and has the goal of removing 90% of floating ocean plastic by 2040.

Sources: ‘Over four billion plastic particles found on beach sand of remote paradise island’ by Tammana Begum, April 2021, Science News, National History Museum, UK; ‘Breaking the Plastic Wave: A Comprehensive Assessment of Pathways Towards Stopping Ocean Plastic Pollution by The Pew Charitable Trusts and SYSTEMIQ, July 2020, and www.theoceancleanup.com

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PACIFIC ISLAND COUNTRIES COMBATING PLASTIC POLLUTION

Pacific Islanders depend on the ocean for their food and livelihood. These small island countries are surrounded by oceans. The Pacific Island countries are estimated to contribute less than 1% of world ocean’s plastic pollution, but ocean currents carry huge amounts of plastic debris to their shores. Plastic is a serious threat to ecosystems, and also affecting the food chains, says the Environmental Investigation Agency in its report Islands of Opportunity, April 2020.

A study in the Pacific found plastic debris in 97% of examined fish species and 25% of humans. The plastic pollution is affecting both the tourism industry and the fishing industry. Added to this plastic production is estimated to produce 400 million tonnes of greenhouse gases each year. As with climate change, despite contributing very little to the problem, the Pacific Island countries are facing the brunt of the problem when it comes to marine plastic pollution.

The Pacific Regional Litter Action Plan 2018-2025 is the primary means through which the region is collaborating to address the plastic pollution crisis and sets out the key actions to minimise marine pollution across Pacific Island Countries and Territories. The plan has been coordinated by the Secretariat of the Pacific Regional Environment Programme (SPREP) to build on Cleaner Pacific 2025 and has been developed in consultation with all 21 island members.

With a total population of about 10 million people on about 500 inhabited islands, these nations are responsible for managing over the 30 million square kilometres of ocean which lie within their Exclusive Economic Zones.

One challenge for these countries is that virtually all consumable goods are shipped or flown to 15 of the Pacific Island Countries. These island nations have limited space for landfill and are in most cases too small to facilitate recycling industries.

The Pacific Regional Litter Action Plan 2018-2025 states:

“It is our responsibility to set policy and actions for the future. Policies, multi-lateral environmental agreements and codes of practice are all required so that we can collectively either REFUSE – to prevent deleterious substances being imported to the Pacific; or ensure REUSE / RECYCLING / REDUCE / RETURN – to promote a circular economy and good waste management practices. Certainly, it is well beyond our Island economies to fund, control and manage the waste generated through imports to our Pacific Island Countries and Territories. Analysis as part of the Pacific Region Infrastructure Facility Urban Sector Working Group suggests in excess of 4.7 to 5 million tonnes of materials are imported to the Pacific Island Countries and Territories per annum, dominated by motor vehicles, oil, paper / cardboard and PET [polyethylene terephthalate – clear lightweight 100% recyclable] containers. Only about 1 million tonnes return to source, being predominantly used motor / cooking oils, PET containers and scrap metal. These figures are at best estimates but indicative of the problem, the Pacific Island Countries and Territories accumulating substantial volumes of waste annually. Recycling and reuse is challenging, with limited suitable land available for transfer stations, waste treatment and disposal and a lack of infrastructure.”

The 21 nations under SPREP are working on ways to prevent litter from cruise ships, fishing boats entering the ocean, to raise awareness within their communities of the importance of reducing the use of plastic and finding sustainable alternatives. Beach clean-ups are being run.

The Pacific Regional Litter Action Plan does not include mechanisms to drive change beyond the region’s capacity. But with the increasing problem of growing plastic pollution from other countries entering in the Pacific Ocean, the report plan emphasises that this is a global issue and that “waste is everyone’s problem and everyone’s responsibility”.

Sources: ‘Plastic Pollution Prevention in Pacific Island Countries: Gap analysis of current legislations, policies and plans’, August 2020, Environmental Investigation Agency; ‘Plastic and Health: The Hidden Costs of a Plastic Planet by D Azoulay et al, 2019, Centre for International Environmental Law, ‘Marine Litter – Pacific Regional Action Plan 2018-2025’.

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UN PLASTIC POLLUTION TREATY

On 2 March 2022, 175 nations agreed to begin writing a United Nations (UN) treaty to end plastic pollution and forge an international legally binding agreement by 2024. The resolution addresses the full lifecycle of plastic, including its production, design and disposal. Representatives from UN member states gathered at the Fifth Session of the UN Environment Assembly (UNEA05). The treaty will be the first legally-binding international framework to combat plastic pollution.

“Today marks a triumph by planet earth over single-use plastics. This is the most significant environmental multilateral deal since the Paris accord. It is an insurance policy for this generation

and future ones, so they may live with plastic and not be doomed by it,” said Inger Andersen, Executive Director of UN Environment Assembly.

Plastic production is a global industry valued at US\$522.6 billion and is expected to double by 2040. It is also predicted that by 2050 greenhouse gas emissions associated with plastic production, use and disposal would account for 15% of allowed emissions, under the goal of limiting global warming. Both these factors are devastating for the Pacific Island countries.

In early June 2022 representatives of UN member states and a diverse set of other stakeholders met for the Stockholm+50. It was 50 years since the UN 1972 Stockholm Conference that was the first world conference to make the environment a major issue, and out of which the UN Environment Programme, responsible for coordinating responses to environmental issues, was formed. At Stockholm+50 focus was on the “triple planetary crisis of climate change, pollution and biodiversity loss”, but also highlighted the opportunity for positive change.

The representative of Vanuatu encouraged international cooperation to stop fossil-fuel production. Noting that the health of the ocean has special significance for Pacific islands, providing ecosystem services and more than 50 per cent of the Earth’s oxygen, he said protecting it is a matter of urgency. In 2022, Vanuatu’s Parliament declared a climate emergency, the first Pacific Island country to do so, and announced its goal to seek an advisory opinion from the International Court of Justice clarifying the legal obligations of States on climate change protection.

The representative of the Marshall Islands said major economies have neglected the promise made at the 1972 Stockholm Conference. Her country, like other low-lying island States, has paid the greatest price for this global inertia. The Marshall Islands are awash with plastic waste. “We are failing the world and we are failing the most vulnerable,” she said, adding that the United Nations has not responded to the crisis in front of it and is losing public credibility. Here in Stockholm, the Organization must start with honesty and trust, mutual accountability and political will, she said, stressing that her country’s future depends on it.

On 28 June at the UN Ocean Conference in Lisbon Siaosi ‘Ofakivahafolau, Prime Minister of Tonga, aligning himself with the Pacific Small Island Developing States and the Pacific Islands Forum, said that — as a State whose territory is 98 per cent ocean — Tonga holds Sustainable Development Goal 14 to conserve and sustainably use the oceans, seas and marine resources “dear to her heart”. Conservation efforts and sustainable development in Tonga depend on a healthy, resilient ocean that can function, among other things, as a climate regulator. Since 2017, the Government has worked to fulfil its voluntary commitments, including the development of the first national ocean-management plan, the protection of marine areas and the development of a blue-economy strategy to sustainably harvest ocean resources. He urged the international community to support sustainable blue economies and negotiate instruments to address plastic pollution and protect marine biodiversity in areas beyond national jurisdiction.

As with global warming we are once again looking at situation in which the individual actions and choices of each and every one of us make a significance difference to the future of the precious Pacific Ocean and its island countries.

Sources: ‘UN Plastic Pollution Treaty Under Discussion’ by Brian Hutchinson, 2 March 2022, Oceanic Society; www.unep.org, and www.stockholm50.global

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