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Lethal food: Plastic waste in the oceans

Oil as well as waste is destroying the oceans

Oil spills such as that in the Gulf of Mexico poison maritime regions for decades. There are other materials that also contaminate the oceans-- tonnes of plastic bags, styrofoam waste or old fishing nets. In the North Sea alone there is an estimated 600,000 cubic metres of waste on and in the ocean floor. The majority of North Sea waste comes from ships and the fishing industry, but rivers and tourism are also sources of input to the oceans. A great many marine organisms are put in immediate danger. "It is high time to put effective strategies in place to counteract the waste accumulation in oceans," demanded Jochen Flasbarth, President of the Federal Environment Agency, on the occasion of European Maritime Day on 20 May 2010.

More than two-thirds of ocean waste consists of plastic, which is particularly worrisome for ecosystems as it is life-threatening for many maritime species. Sea turtles, for example, can suffocate on plastic bags that they eat--mistaking them for their favourite food, the jellyfish. The fulmar also mistakes small pieces of plastic for food, where they remain in the stomach to suggest a permanent sensation of being full. Their physical shape and condition is impacted heavily and they may even die of starvation. To make matters worse, plastic is persistent in the environment where it can remain for up to 450 years.

High follow-up costs

Besides the ecological damage caused by maritime waste, there are also real economic costs. The clean-up of the nearly seven-kilometre stretch of beach at Westerland on Sylt alone involves up to tonnes of waste daily, or an annual volume of about 23,000 bin liners. Annual costs ranging between 750,000 and 1.2 million euros are incurred in Ostholstein. Although many ports already have collection systems for ship waste in place, waste volumes have not been decreasing significantly. This owes in part to the cost of disposal, as collection is not always free of charge and prices vary from port to port.

Monitoring waste in oceans

The new EC Maritime Strategy Framework Directive requires Member States to assess the existence of waste in their maritime regions and to regulate input of waste in a manner that will achieve good ecological status of maritime ecosystems by 2020.

Jochen Flasbarth commented, "The Directive can only achieve something if it is implemented now. Prevention of waste must be a key focus, for merely collecting waste will not be very

effective." UBA is therefore focusing efforts on drawing up strategies to make the problem of ocean waste measurable and to prevent further inputs of waste to the marine environment.

The *Abfälle im Meer - ein gravierendes ökologisches, ökonomisches und ästhetisches Problem* background paper (in German) is available as a free download here:

http://www.umweltbundesamt.de/uba-info-medien-e/mysql_medien.php?anfrage=Kennnummer&Suchwort=3900

The UBA website provides regular updates and news about the oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico as well as background materials.

The Federal Minister for Environment recently issued a 25-cent commemorative stamp which will support ocean protection projects. It has been available in German post offices since May.

Dessau-Roßlau, 19 May 2010