Clean Up Australia Submission

Inquiry into Plastic Pollution in Australia's Oceans and Waterways

House Standing Committee on Climate Change, Energy, Environment and Water

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Clean Up Australia inspires and empowers communities to clean up, fix up and conserve our environment.

More than 20 million Australians have participated in Clean Up Australia activities and events over the past three decades.

Over that time Clean Up Australia has evolved to provide practical solutions to help all Australians live more sustainably every day of the year, and emerged as one of the country's most recognised, credible, and trusted environmental charities.

Today our focus is as much on preventing rubbish entering our environment as it is removing what has already accumulated.

What was started over thirty years ago, by an "average Australian" who had a simple idea to make a difference in his own backyard has now become the nation's largest community-based environmental event.

Of course, Australia's environmental challenges can't be solved in just one day, so Clean Up Australia works with community, government, and businesses to provide practical solutions to help us all live more sustainably every day of the year.

Clean Up Australia offers feedback on the following areas on which submission was invited:

The environmental impacts of plastic pollution particularly in oceans and waterways

While sailing the world's oceans during the 1980s, Ian Kiernan AO, Founder of Clean Up Australia, reported seeing alarming quantities of rubbish – noting the predominance of plastics.

As early as 1989, he predicted that single-use plastics would be a scourge for our generation.

Since then, the world's attention has been seized by reported islands or patches of plastics - one of which, the Great Pacific Garbage Patch, is estimated to be the size of a continent: three times bigger than France. It reportedly took the American captain who discovered it in 1997 seven days to cross. And disturbingly, most of the plastic in the ocean is unseen beneath the surface.

Some 14 million more tonnes of plastic make their way into the world's oceans [1]every year. And when the animals and seabirds which eat it wash up dead onshore, only their bodies decay, not the plastic in their bellies. By 2050, scientists predict that, tonne for tonne[2], there will be more plastic in the ocean than fish[3].

Today, we have a confusing array of plastic and plastic derivatives entering our supply chain, only a small percentage of which can be collected and recycled into new products.

[1] https://www.iucn.org/resources
[2] https://www3.weforum.org/docs/WEF_The_New_Plastics_Economy.pdf
[3] Brisbane Times, Sherryn Groch: February 17, 2022

As a result, consumers are confused, often disposing of plastics such as soft plastics, like confectionery wrappers and plastic bags in their kerbside recycling [because the labelling tells them it is recyclable], resulting in management issues and equipment failure at their local waste processing facility.

Waste Management Association of Australia CEO, Gayle Sloan, suggests that the potential emissions reduction from a truly circular plastics system in Australia, with products reused or reduced, is in its infancy. This is because a lot of what can be 'recycled' is actually 'downcycled', e.g. A plastic bottle might live just two extra lives before it ends up in landfill.

Once there, or in our oceans, a plastic item is estimated to last hundreds, even thousands of years, progressively eroding until it ends up as microplastics by which time it's nearly impossible to remove.

But that's just one part of the story.

According to Steven Feit, Senior lawyer at the Centre for International Environmental Law.[4], "Plastic is made from finite fossil fuel, run-offs and both producing it and burning it create emissions. It's something like two-and-a-half tonnes of carbon dioxide equivalent for every tonne of plastic you make and another two-and-a-half tonnes per tonne of plastic you burn. So once you hit the store shelves, at least half of its emissions are already blown. And what's dangerous is it's growing."[5]

In the past four decades, plastic production has quadrupled, and the World Economic Forum expects it will double in the next 20 years. If that trend continues, scientists estimate emissions from plastic will make up 15 per cent of the world's remaining carbon budget by 2050.[6]

Today, the impact of plastic garners most public attention at the end of its life cycle, when it's sighted on our beaches, in our waterways and parklands.

Clean Up Australia's annual Rubbish Report[7] tracks the types of litter items ending up in our environment and is an invaluable resource in identifying trends in the types and spread of rubbish throughout Australia. Sadly, plastic litter continues to dominate and is growing year on year. And while packaging continues to dominate waste streams, the World Health Organisation warns that extra waste[8] from disposable masks, gloves, and other medical gear during the pandemic are further straining waste systems.

Throughout the worldwide pandemic, billions of masks were disposed every day. Masks are predominantly plastic and an example of single use items that are not designed for easy recycling and capture of resources. Many Australians, like other citizens around the world, were deeply concerned by the waste generated by these items. During 2022, Clean Up Australia called on our volunteers to collect and count the number of masks removed during their Clean Up efforts and encouraged industry to look for better PPE design solutions that are kinder on the environment.

[4] Senior lawyer at the Centre for International Environmental Law Steven Feit, who has been tracking the impact of plastics around the globe - Brisbane Times, Sherryn Groch: February 17, 2022
[5] Senior lawyer at the Centre for International Environmental Law Steven Feit, - Brisbane Times, Sherryn Groch: February 17, 2022
[6] https://www.nature.com/articles/s41558-019-0459-z
[7] https://www.cleanup.org.au/rubbish-report
[8] https://www.brisbanetimes.com.au/environment/sustainability/who-warns-of-strain-from-spike-in-plastic-waste-during-pandemic-20220208-p59uow.html

The effectiveness of Australia's plastics management framework under the National Plastics Plan and related policies to reduce plastic pollution particularly in oceans and waterways

Until recently, the scale of the plastics problem in Australia had been less visible because our excess waste was shipped overseas. While much of it was still unable to be recycled there, its convenient removal from our shores created an illusion that the system could cope with our waste[9].

In 2020, Federal banning of the export of unprocessed plastic and the pledge to spend $190 million to build the infrastructure needed to recycle it domestically, together with private industry infrastructure investment such as the 'Remade in Australia' Plant in Albury, and the setting of targets to recycle 70 per cent of plastic packaging by 2025 was welcome news.

But disappointingly, the APCO Collective Impact Report[10] shows that Australia is on track to recycle only 36 per cent of our plastics annually by the 2025 deadline.

For these targets to become a reality we need buy-in from players in the supply chain including the: design – manufacturing – filling – distribution practices – separation – collection – recycling /disposal – market re-entry.

Clean Up Australia's community, partners and allies are telling us there is more that can be done and that a lot of the following actions are attainable:

- Clearly defining what is a plastic – assisting recognition beyond the obvious e.g. plastics in clothing, paper products; and then working with designers and manufacturers to replace this element/component.
- Expand, encourage, monitor, and reward voluntary actions that complement mandatory measures.
- Encourage and reward avoidance, eradicating problematic and single use plastics through the availability and adoption of more re-use, recycled content.
- The national extension of Container Refund Schemes (CRS) to include other plastic containers, such as shampoo, sauce bottles, laundry products, other sized plastic beverage containers.
- Businesses will welcome standardisation across industries to encourage use of the types of polymers that offer greater recyclability e.g. products packaged in high-grade clear plastic.
- Active collaboration between all sectors across the supply chain to share learnings to better avoid the introduction of new products with perverse outcomes e.g., leaching from plastics in playgroup surfaces.
- Pro-active discouraging of the mixing of materials to simplify harvesting for recycling. For example, the drink bottle which contains three-four types of plastic – the bottle, its label, lid and lid ring need to be replaced by a single material type.
- The community also has a role to play in keeping the pressure on brands to make these changes by voting with their wallets.

[9] Senior lawyer at the Center for International Environmental Law Steven Feit, - Brisbane Times, Sherryn Groch: February 17, 2022

[10] https://documents.packagingcovenant.org.au/public-documents/APCO%20Collective%20Impact%20Report

The effectiveness of the Australian Government's engagement with states, territories, industry and non-government organisations to reduce plastic pollution particularly in oceans and waterways

In 2021, state and territory environment ministers agreed to standardise recycling collection[11] to streamline sorting, a move also backed by the Australian Local Government Association.

Clean Up Australia applauds the significant number of initiatives that have been launched and/or implemented by government and industry, noting a demonstrable escalation of this activity over the last decade. Joint ventures, grants and infrastructure investment have delivered a significant suite of solutions that are already delivering quantifiable results.

We particularly note:

- Revitalised focus on harmonised and collaborative data collection via the CSIRO project – the national Plastics Portal
- National introduction of a Container Refund Scheme and projected upscaling as part of the next stage of its evolution
- A community committed to cleaning up that has resulted in >33-year heritage of Clean Up Australia Day and every day community-led action that has influenced the implementation of resource recovery and waste management reform.

Community awareness and engagement is high. Media interest, attention and engagement has triggered broadening interest in the level of waste created and its disposal outcomes.
Businesses are increasingly taking action to reduce plastic and recycle more. We are starting to see results from pledges made at the Federal Plastics Summit 2020, with initiatives such as:

- **Unilever** being well down the pathway of delivering its 2025 pledge to:
  - halve its use of virgin plastic, by reducing its absolute use of plastic packaging by more than 100,000 tonnes and accelerating its use of recycled plastic
  - help collect and process more plastic packaging than it sells.

- We are seeing government and industry investment and collaboration towards a circular economy, such as the Circular Plastics Recycling plant in Albury – a JV between Cleanaway, Asahi, CCA and PACT with Federal Government support.

- The 'Remade in Australia' initiative is complemented by 'Buy Recycled', a consumer-facing platform launched by **Clean Up Australia** which actively encourages the promotion of creative producers of recycled materials.

- National retailers are taking the lead in replacing single-use items on their shelves with reusable non-plastic alternatives.

State and Territory legislation focusing on phasing out problematic and single use plastics is gaining momentum across the country.

[11] https://www.agriculture.gov.au/sites/default/files/documents/emm-1-agreed-communique.pdf

Australia boasts low levels of mismanaged waste when compared to global standards. We are seeing growing investment in sophisticated recycling technology such as that developed and delivered by Cleanaway and IQ Renew. And, Kerbside collection separation and resource recovery is evolving to better reflect the composition of waste generated domestically and commercially.

The effectiveness of community campaigns to reduce plastic pollution particularly in oceans and waterways and encourage the use of alternative materials

Over the past 3 decades over 20 million Clean Up Australia volunteers have donated more than 38 million hours to their local communities, removing hundreds of thousands of ute loads of rubbish from every corner of Australia.

The data they share[12] with Clean Up Australia is reported in three ways:

1. By **material type** e.g. plastics, metals or glass
2. In **groups** of like items regardless of material type [e.g. beverage containers which are glass, plastic or metal] and
3. As individual **items**.

In 2021[13], soft plastics, as a percentage of types of rubbish reported, increased by 4%, polystyrene and metals by 1%.

Glass decreased by 4% and miscellaneous items by 2%, hard plastics, rubber, paper, and wood remained on par.

Plastic remained the dominant waste type reported by volunteers. Making up 39.9% of all rubbish removed, plastics accounted for 144,066 of surveyed items.

Made from non-renewable, oil-based resources, plastics removed by Clean Up volunteers are not biodegradable and could, if left in situ, survive in the environment for hundreds of years. At best, plastic breaks up into smaller and smaller pieces – which is a worse environmental outcome, with smaller pieces entering the food chain earlier.

A total of 30 different forms of plastic waste are categorised in the rubbish survey.

In 2021, soft plastics were separated into their own category. Counts include plastic food, retail and garbage bags, plastic confectionery wrappers, cling wrap and 'other' soft plastics. 2021 volunteers counted 38,266 [33,562 in 2020] of these items, representing 17.7% of all surveyed rubbish and 44.4% [40.4% in 2020] of plastics.

Plastic beverage container counts continue to fall. We are still seeing evidence of 'container hunting' in states where the redemption scheme is new, but established states are reporting decreased counts as more containers are intercepted for redemption before they become litter. In 2021, beverage containers reflected 13.3% [15.5% in 2020] of counted rubbish. This is 4.6% down on 2019 figures.

[12] https://www.cleanup.org.au/rubbish-report
[13] https://irp.cdn-website.com/ed061800/files/uploaded/2021_National%20Fact%20Sheet.pdf

While again decreasing their % representations, cigarette butts remain the # 1 individual item reported by volunteers. In 2021 they represented 14.3% [16.2% in 2020] of all reported rubbish which is a welcome decrease of 1.9% and 7.7% over 2019. While small, the environmental impact of a cigarette butt cannot be underestimated. Leaching toxins and leaving small pieces of plastic in their wake – every littered butt provides immediate, short and long-term danger for our precious flora and fauna.

What is clear is that small stuff remains an issue. Butts, wrappers, lids and pieces of glass dominated the Top 10 list, rising by 3% to now account for one third [30% in 2020] of the Top 10 reported rubbish.

46% of single items reported in 2021 were either plastic or contain plastic. Its persistence is the challenge – hard plastics will outlive us all, and they, polystyrene and their soft plastic cousins rip or break up, with the danger of entering the food-chain.

Plastics make up 41.1% of rubbish counted within parks, 32.8% of rubbish along roadsides & footpaths and 32.5% of reported items in waterways [rivers + beach/coastal areas + dive sites].

The following table shows the proportions of different types of rubbish removed from each site as a percentage of all rubbish reported.

	River/Cre	Parks	Beach/Co	Roadsides	Footpaths	Bushland	Shops/Ma	Schools	Outdoor t	Dive sites	Other	Total
Plastic	36.8	41.1	37.6	34.5	31.2	40.1	39.3	54.0	23.0	28.0	35.6	37.9
Polystyrene	9.3	6.8	6.2	7.8	5.9	5.3	4.2	3.6	0.9	2.3	2.2	6.7
Glass	8.7	8.7	7.8	8.3	6.1	15.3	9.1	4.6	2.7	12.6	4.2	8.4
Rubber	1.1	1.0	1.9	1.1	2.0	1.8	1.1	1.2	0.5	0.9	2.1	1.4
Paper/cardboa	11.9	14.6	10.0	15.5	13.6	11.8	14.3	12.7	8.1	1.5	15.3	13.1
Metals	13.0	12.8	13.1	14.4	12.9	17.9	14.3	14.7	6.3	6.6	11.2	13.7
Wood	0.7	1.9	0.9	0.8	1.7	1.0	0.4	1.6	0.2	1.1	0.4	1.2
Miscellaneous	18.6	13.1	22.4	17.6	26.6	6.8	17.2	7.6	58.4	47.0	29.0	17.7
TOTAL	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

Plastics are the most common items reported across all locations and are most likely to be found in parks, in waterways, roadside, or along footpaths. Here the most common plastics are the single use items – straws, utensils, cups, plates, bags … all of which are target items within plastic bans currently being enacted across Australia.

Global initiatives underway to reduce plastic pollution particularly in oceans and waterways

The ANZPAC Alliance[14], of which Clean Up Australia is an active NGO member, is bringing together links of the supply chain to encourage collaboration and co-operations to meet defined targets with measurable milestones.

And the call for interested parties to contribute to the discussion of an International Treaty on Plastic pollution via submission to the department of Climate Change, Energy, the Environment and Water was a welcome inclusion.

[14] https://anzpacplasticspact.org.au/

In conclusion, Clean Up Australia's volunteers urge our decision-makers to:

- Provide accessible and affordable recycling infrastructure
- Replicate collection vehicles such as CRS which delivers economic benefits and good clean recyclate and consider extending this scheme to other plastic containers such as shampoo, tomato sauce and food containers, e-waste. We know putting a value on waste works.
- Encourage and support collaboration across the entire supply chain in finding solutions
- Address the impact of imports at the global level through uniform product stewardship
- Promote metrics standardisation

The key to success will be to encourage and reward those brands that incorporate recyclate into their products and we need to create the incentives for them to do so.

We all need to be part of the solution to create demand for a circular economy.
This includes government procurement policies and driving business and consumer demand through product and packaging innovation that breaks the cycle of virgin plastic as a materials source.

We thank you for the opportunity to participate in this inquiry.

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