

## 7 Surprising Facts about Plastic in Japan



Robin Lewis [Follow](#)

May 28, 2019 · 6 min read

One day, I received an *individual strawberry* as a gift from someone in Tokyo.

While this was a lovely gesture, there was one slight issue...

The strawberry was — no joke— wrapped in **5 pieces of plastic**.



A single strawberry wrapped in 5 pieces of plastic. Hmmm...

A few hours later, I was sat on my living room floor, trying to mentally digest what was going on here... How could it take 5 pieces of packaging (which would take hundreds of years to decompose) to safeguard one, albeit beautiful, strawberry? Is the Japanese fruit industry really that fraught with danger?

I didn't know whether to laugh or cry... But after a while, it struck me that this gift was a symptom of a much larger problem; **systemic, uncontrolled overconsumption of plastics**.

From bento boxes to convenience store bags, single-use plastics are ubiquitous in everyday life in Japan. And amidst growing concern over the ocean plastics crisis globally, the conversation around the perils of plastic waste is still in a relatively early stage here.

Below are seven facts about plastic in Japan that help us to understand the context, challenges and opportunities on the road ahead:

## 1. Per Capita Plastic Consumption



Japan ranks number 2 in the world in terms of plastic packaging waste per capita, according to the UN.

Japan is **SECOND in the world** (after the USA) in terms of plastic packaging waste per capita.

In fact, according to Statista, **Japan produces more plastic per capita — 106 kilos — than China and the rest of Asia combined**, at just 94 kilos (note that some of this is produced for export).

## 2. Recycling Rate: Is It Really 84%?



The Japanese symbol for recyclable plastic

The official “recycling rate” of end-of-life plastics in Japan is 84%.

However, it’s important to note that this figure includes **BURNING** plastic as a form of energy, so it may be a little misleading...

In fact, over half of the plastic that is “recycled” is incinerated. Here’s how it works.

Plastic recycling is generally divided into 3 categories, under current legislation:

- **Thermal recycling:** burning plastic for energy (56%).
- **Material recycling:** Reusing the plastic (23%).



- **Chemical recycling:** Using raw materials for industrial purposes (4%).

So, not all of the plastic we meticulously divide and put into the rubbish bin is reborn into new materials. In fact, Forbes Magazine claims that **as much as 70%** of the plastic collected for recycling in Japan is incinerated.

### 3. Plastic Bags



Plastic bag consumption in Japan; when will retailers be forced to charge customers at the national level?  
(Photo: Jin115)

The average person in Japan uses up to **450 plastic bags per year**.

That's a national total of some **30 billion plastic bags**, every year.

The Tokyo Metropolitan Government announced its goal of getting all retailers to charge a small fee for plastic shopping bags by 2020, whereas places like Kyoto have already implemented legislation requiring large retailers to charge for plastic bags.

Tokyo's Sugunami ward established the first ordinance in Japan promoting a charge on plastic bags. Within 7 years, over 30% of consumers in the area refrained from using plastic bags and that percentage continues to grow, suggesting that the hand of government can make a major impact.



## 4. PET Bottles



Almost 85% of Polyethylene terephthalate (PET) bottles are reportedly recycled in Japan.

The average person in Japan buys 183 PET bottles per year.

Put another way, 740 PET bottles are bought nationwide every second.

As of fiscal 2017, the recycling rate for PET bottles was 84.8%, among the highest in the world.

## 5. National Targets







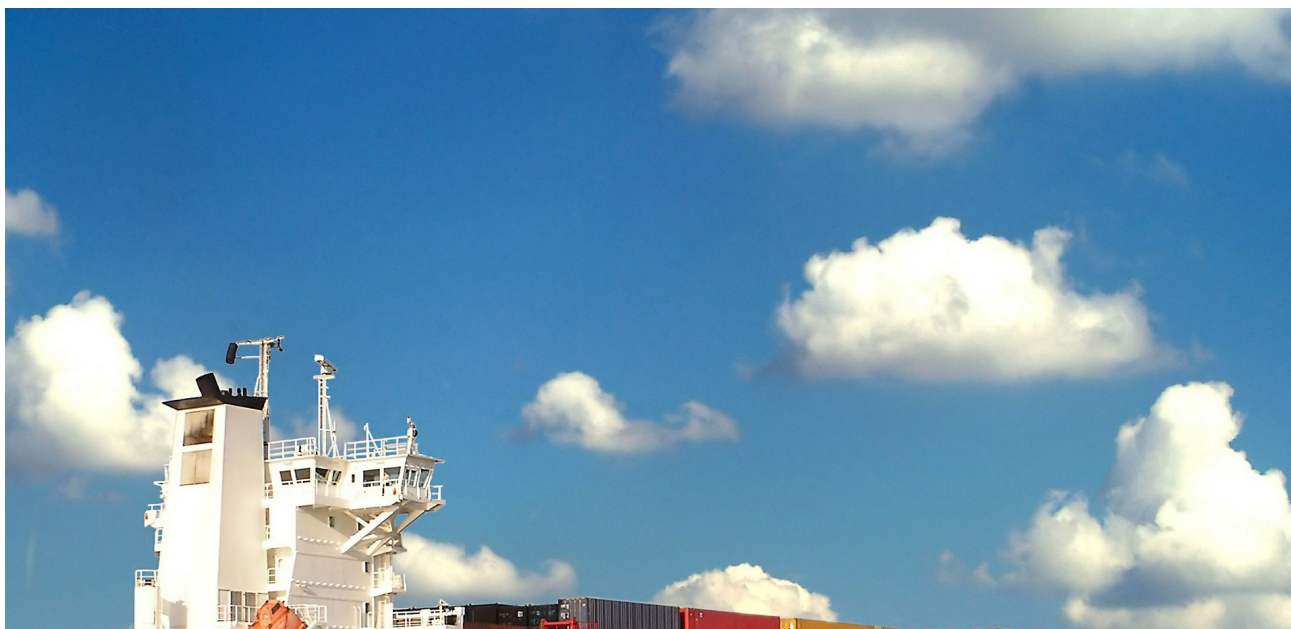
Rubbish bins outside a convenience store in Tokyo.

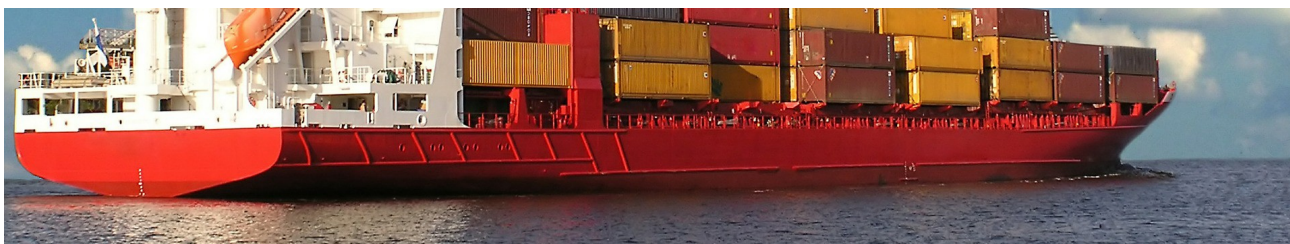
In 2018, Japan's government unveiled a proposal to reduce the country's 9.4 million tonnes of **plastic waste a year by 25% by 2030**.

The government has also decided to make it mandatory for retail shops to charge for plastic shopping bags in a bid to reduce waste, although this has yet to be enforced at the national level.

To the dismay of many environmentalists, however, both Japan and the USA declined to sign the G7 Pact to reduce the use of single-use plastics and prevent plastic pollution in 2018.

## 6. The China Ban Effect





China banned plastic waste imports in 2017, causing ripples across much of the world.

In 2017, Japan generated 9 million tons of plastic waste. About 10% of that was shipped to China (70% of Japan's total exports of plastic waste).

That same year (2017), China banned plastic waste imports to reduce pollution from the recycling process.

This has left the government in a major pickle. As a result, Japan has had to shift its plastic waste export strategy, by increasing exports to countries such as Indonesia and Vietnam as alternatives.

## 7. Plastic Recycling Facilities Under Pressure





Plastic recycling facilities have their hands full meeting rising demand post-China ban (Photo: Sangyo Times)

As exports of plastic waste decline, reports suggest that domestic facilities are struggling to cope with the spiked demand.

In fact, recent reports suggest that the Ministry of Environment will ask municipalities to accept and dispose of industrial plastic waste as an emergency measure.

Some companies are quickly making strategic investments into plastic recycling facilities to meet this rising demand. For example, Daiei Kankyo Holdings, a recycling company based in Kobe, is set to open a 1.5 billion yen (\$13.8 million) plant in Osaka in 2020.

. . .

のーぶら  
No Plastic Japan

[HOME](#)

[ABOUT // 「のーぶら」とは](#)

[SHOP](#)

[BLOG](#)

商品 // PRODUCTS

[すべてを見る // View all >](#)



Straw set ストローセット  
¥1,200

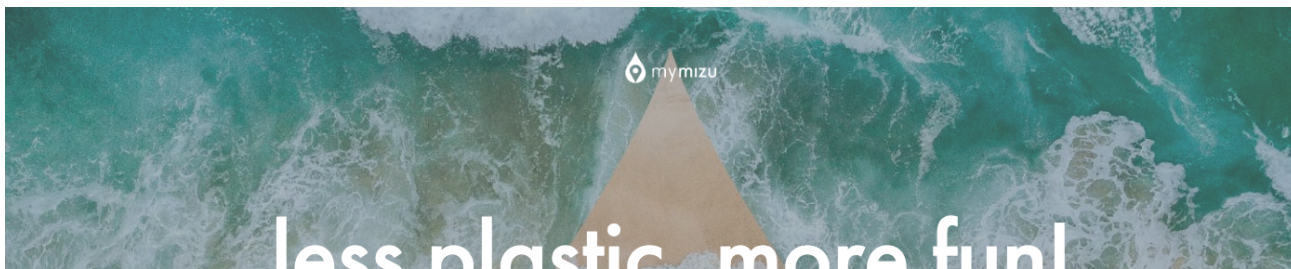


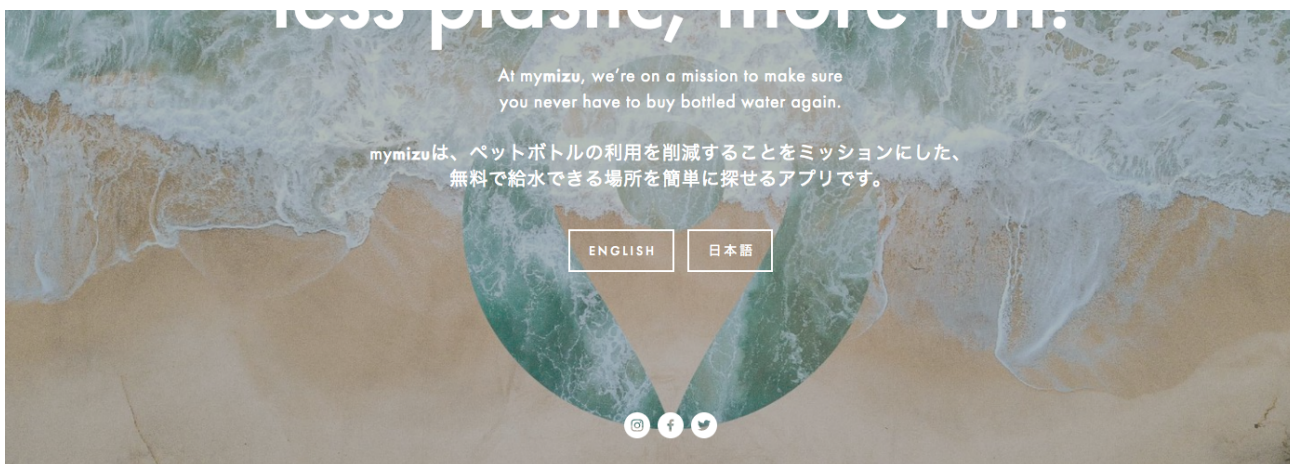
THIN straw THINストロー  
¥400



THICK straw THICKストロー  
¥600

のーぶら No Plastic Japan sells metal straws as alternatives to plastic ones.





MyMizu is Japan's 1st free water refill app, connecting users with 8,000+ free refill stations across Japan to help reduce consumption of single-use plastic bottles.

In response to this profligate use of single-use plastics, the Japanese government is facing rising pressure internationally, as well as from the inside, from groups like Greenpeace Japan.

There's also a growing awareness of the plastics problem on the consumer side, with a rising number of grassroots movements (e.g. 530 week), social ventures (e.g. のーぷら No Plastic Japan, MyMizu) and mega-celebrities like Rola using their voice to speak up about the issue.



Japanese "Talent" Rola using her celebrity status to encourage people to go #PlasticFree (Photo: Instagram)

Companies like Adidas, Lush and Patagonia are also taking the lead, showing that the private sector will not stand idle as we witness the destruction of the environment through irresponsible consumption habits.

So, there is some reason for hope. But, like in many other countries, the question remains as to how to create real, system-wide change around plastic production and consumption (an integral part of UN Sustainable Development Goal 12).

The future is looking bleak; by 2050, there are predicted to be more plastics in the ocean than fish, and there is mounting evidence that plastics pose serious health risks to humans on a global scale. In response, many countries are moving towards outright bans of single-use plastics around the world.

Will Japan follow suit? Only time will tell.

. . .

For more on social and environmental issues in Japan, check out *5 social businesses in Japan changing the way we "do good"*, or *Sanpo Yoshi: the Japanese business principle of success through responsibility*.

Plastic Pollution

Plastic Waste

Ocean Plastic

Plastic

Japan

About

Help

Legal