



# Plastic Waste Becoming Main Issue in Japan

At a mid-December meeting of the United Nations World Tourism Organization and UNESCO, Kyoto Mayor Daisaku Kadokawa spoke with pride about his city's successes in the area of sustainable, environmentally friendly tourism.



“Since 2000, when we produced nearly 820,000 tons of household and industrial garbage, we’ve reduced that amount by half (as of last year) to around 410,000 tons.

We did this despite a huge increase in the number of tourists over the past few years,” the mayor told the delegates.

The city’s goal is to further reduce the annual amount to 390,000 tons by the end of 2021.

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But dealing with the city’s plastic garbage remains an expensive undertaking.

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domestic, buy more and more products that come wrapped or packed in plastic.

But change may be afoot and 2019 could eventually be remembered as the year that not only local governments like Kyoto's began to expend more time and effort to reduce the amount of plastic but also the year when the national government made it a top priority.

Stung by a 2018 report from the U.N. Environment Program that Japan, after the United States, was the world's second largest generator of plastic waste per capita, the government used the 2019 Group of 20 leaders' summit in Osaka to push for change.

Japan also found itself facing international criticism for its refusal, along with the U.S., to sign a charter at the Group of Seven summit in 2018 that aims to reduce the use of disposable plastic,

In May, the Abe government launched a strategy aimed at reducing disposable plastic waste by 25 percent by 2030.

The government plans to reach the target by ordering that all containers and packaging be designed to be reusable or recyclable by 2025.

It also aims for a 60 percent recycling rate for containers and packaging by 2030 and 100 percent utilization of used plastics by 2035.

"We should be proud of some of the great inventions the 20th century gave us. Plastics are one of them.

Without plastics, we could not have made packages of fresh food, that are easy to be shipped and put on display at supermarkets," Prime Minister Shinzo Abe told the annual Science and Technology in Society Forum, a gathering in Kyoto of international scientific experts, corporate leaders and government policymakers, in October.

"What we need is the good management of waste while calling for innovations to give us solutions," he added.

In the face of calls by some environmental groups for a ban on the sale of plastic bags — led by Kyoto's neighbor Kameoka, which approved an ordinance that does just that — the government decided that, beginning July 1, stores will have to start charging customers for plastic bags.

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“What I want everyone in Japan to understand is that Japan is behind other countries (in charging for plastic bags). We want to do positive things that reduce, even by a little bit, the amount of plastic in the oceans,” Environment Minister Shinjiro Koizumi told reporters — while carrying his own reusable bag — in Tokyo earlier this month.

But Hiroaki Odachi, team leader at Greenpeace Japan’s plastic project, says the government’s plan for plastic waste reduction is vague and insufficient.

“The 25 percent reduction target is quite low and it doesn’t even state the baseline year for the decrease,” he says.

The issue of single-use plastic bags received much attention in 2019 because of the sheer number of bags handed out nationwide.

There are no official figures, but recent media reports estimate that as many 45 billion disposable plastic bags are given away to shoppers annually.

Yet disposable plastic bags only account for about 2 percent of the roughly 9 million tons of plastic waste generated annually in Japan.

That figure includes mountains of disposable food containers and bottles.

A 2018 survey of garbage collected nationwide by the All Japan River Network NGO showed nearly 45,000 plastic bottles had been tossed into rivers and streams.

Reducing the number of bottles used is now receiving more political attention, with Koizumi touting the “my bottle solution,” whereby people carry their own thermoses or containers rather than stop at a store or a vending machine to buy a drink in a disposable container.

The rising global and domestic concern over too much plastic has at least prompted some businesses in Japan to make changes.

Starbucks will begin a phase out from January of plastic straws, with the aim of completing their removal at all 1,500 shops nationwide by March.

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The Skylark Group, which operates over a dozen restaurant chains in Japan, has already banned plastic straws. Convenience stores such as 7-Eleven, meanwhile, are switching to biodegradable wrapping.

These national, local government and private sector efforts to reduce plastic waste are also part of a larger international effort to address the problem of ocean waste.

At the G20 summit, members agreed on the “Osaka Blue Ocean Vision,” which set a goal of reducing additional marine plastic litter to zero worldwide by 2050.

The United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific says the Asia-Pacific region is responsible for about 60 percent of the increase in global plastic production.

Approximately 8 million tons of plastic finds its way into the oceans each year and without action to deal with the waste, the body predicted the world’s oceans will be awash with nearly 250 million tons of plastic by 2025.

While there are no official estimates of the total amount of plastic that might be flowing into the seas around Japan annually, some local governments are attempting to find out how serious the problem really is on their doorstep.

Last year, the Union of Kansai Governments, which includes the governors of eight Kansai prefectures and the mayors of four major cities, announced the results of a survey in Osaka Bay.

Researchers took small samples of plastic garbage from the bay and concluded the whole area may contain up to 9 million plastic bags and pieces of vinyl.

Overall, public concern about plastic waste in the ocean appears strong.

A survey of over 1,600 people by the Cabinet Office, conducted in August with results announced in October, showed 89 percent had concerns about the issue.

About one-third of the those polled said they were extremely concerned.

Given different choices on how they’d like to try to prevent the problem from worsening, 54 percent

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Thirty-eight percent said they would try to use their own bottles and not buy disposable drink containers.

“The next steps needed include discussion on all SUP (single-use plastics), including banning unnecessary SUP and introducing a reusable model on a wide scale,” Greenpeace Japan’s Odachi said.

Worldwide, dozens of countries have enacted full or partial bans on single use plastics. But in Japan, Odachi said such ambitious discussions are not yet taking place in the Diet.

## REFS

Published on [japantimes.co.jp](http://japantimes.co.jp)

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