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These Countries Produce the Most Plastic Waste

SAMANDA DORGER · FEB 26, 2019 8:08 PM EST

Humans have produced about 8 billion tons of plastic since 1950, and more than half of it went straight to landfills. Of all of the plastic that's no longer in use, only about 9% was actually recycled.

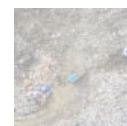
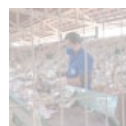
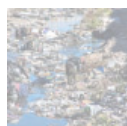
Much of the plastic that isn't recycled or sent to landfills is believed to end up in the ocean. Scientists [estimate](#) that 4.8 to 12.7 million metric tons enter the ocean in a year.

The average American tossed out about 12 ounces of plastic each day in 2010, the equivalent of about 26 average-size water bottles.

If that seems like a lot, it is. High-income countries tend to generate more plastic waste per person, according to a report on plastic pollution by Hannah Ritchie and Max Roser of Our World in Data. But while high-income countries usually have well-managed waste streams and therefore lower levels of plastic pollution to external environments, plastic waste still enters rivers and oceans, especially from coastal populations (defined as within 50 kilometers of a coastline.) As a result, the U.S. produces a whopping 275,000 tons of plastic litter each year with high risk of polluting surrounding rivers and the ocean, according to the report.

Global plastic waste disposal *has* changed over time: there was virtually no recycling of plastics prior to 1980, while in 2015, an estimated 20% was recycled. Even so, the trend indicates that recycling would increase to only 44% by 2050, the report states.

Based on the September 2018 report "[Plastic Pollution](#)," these are the countries that produce the most plastic waste, plastic that is not recycled or incinerated. The figures represent total plastic waste generation prior to management, not necessarily the amount polluting the environment. The report also provides data on per-capita plastic waste as well as the amount of plastic litter from coastal populations at high risk of polluting rivers and oceans. Data are from 2010.



1. China

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Plastic Waste Generation Per Year: 59.8 million tons

Despite being the No. 1 producer of plastic waste in the world, the daily plastic waste per person per day in China is one of the lowest at .12 kilograms a day - that's about 4 ounces of plastic a day per person.

However, China produces more than 231,000 tons of plastic litter each year - plastics with a high risk of polluting surrounding rivers and the ocean. It's still less than the U.S., but more than almost all other countries.

Above, a man transports recyclable materials in Beijing in 2017.

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