

Big glob of trash hurts animals and the sea

By Los Angeles Times, adapted by Newsela staff on 04.01.18

Word Count **461**

Level **520L**



Image 1. A piece of floating debris snagged during an ocean sampling operation. Photo from Ocean Cleanup/TNS.

The Great Pacific Garbage Patch is a floating glob of plastic trash. It is called GPGP for short. The GPGP sits in the middle of the Pacific Ocean between California and Hawaii. It is really big, a lot bigger than previously thought. It's twice the size of Texas. And it's only getting bigger.

A team of scientists wanted to learn more about the GPGP. They decided to study it from above. They were in for a surprise. The patch was up to 16 times larger than they expected! Worse, they found that the garbage patch is still growing. They published their work in a science journal.

Laurent Lebreton led the study. The scientist called the garbage "frightening."

Plastic Can Hurt All Kinds Of Animals

Plastics are meant to last. That's great for making grocery bags. Many plastics end up in the ocean, though. There, they can cause all kinds of problems. Animals can eat them or be hurt by them. Shellfish and other ocean life can stick to the plastic. Fish and birds then eat these animals. Soon, the plastic has ruined the whole food chain. Scientists do not know exactly how bad for the Earth plastics are. But they are worried about the garbage patch.

Lebreton and his team wanted a bird's-eye view of the patch. They did studies of what the patch looked like from above. They also sent boats to take samples of the trash. They studied these samples closely.

The researchers sorted the plastic they collected by size. Most of the trash pieces were very tiny. There were some larger ones, though.

Fishing Nets Are A Problem

Where did all that trash come from? Fishing nets were part of the problem. They took up about half of the garbage patch's weight. Nets are cheap and easy to replace. Fishing boats often leave them behind. Then they float through the ocean, trapping animals.

Fifty plastic items had dates printed on them. Most were from the 1990s and 2000s. One was from all the way back in 1977 — that is 41 years ago! There were 386 items with words from nine different languages. A third were in Japanese.

Big Wave In Japan

The scientists think they know why. In 2011, Japan was hit by a tsunami. The disaster washed tons and tons of trash into the sea. That trash could have floated across the ocean surface. Then it could have made its way to the garbage patch.

The scientists in this study just looked at floating plastic. There might be much more on the ocean floor.

