

THE UNITED STATES' CONTRIBUTION OF PLASTIC WASTE TO LAND AND OCEAN

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Photo: Isaac Mead-Long/Ocean Conservancy

U.S. and Global Plastic Waste Generation in 2016

- Global plastic production amounted to 422 million metric tons (Mt).
- Global generation of plastic waste reached 242 Mt, representing 12% of all solid waste generated.
- The United States generated the most plastic waste of any country in the world (42 Mt), and the most plastic waste per capita of any country in the world (130 kg per person).
- Though the United States accounts for just 4% of the global population, it generated 17% of all plastic waste.

Fate of U.S. Plastic Waste in 2016

- Between 2-3% of plastic waste in the United States was littered or illegally dumped into the environment.
 - 0.84 Mt due to littering (2% of total generated plastic waste)
 - 0.14 – 0.41 Mt due to illegal dumping (0.33% - 0.98% of total generated plastic waste)
- In total, illegal dumping and littering contributed approximately 1 Mt (0.98 – 1.25 Mt) of plastic waste into U.S. ecosystems.
- Only 9.3% of plastic waste generated in the United States was collected for recycling.
- Of the 3.91 Mt of U.S. plastic waste collected for recycling, 1.99 Mt – or 51% – was exported abroad to 89 trade partners; but the vast majority was exported to only two – China and Hong Kong.
 - 1.48 Mt (74%) was exported to China and Hong Kong
 - 89% was exported to countries where more than 20% of waste is either never collected or otherwise ends up in the environment
- Of the 1.99 Mt of U.S. plastic waste exported abroad, up to 1 Mt (0.15-0.99 Mt) likely ended up in the environment.
- When accounting for both domestic mismanaged waste and plastic waste exports, between 1.13 and 2.42 Mt of U.S. plastic waste ended up in the environment somewhere in the world.
- Of this, between 0.51 and 1.45 Mt of U.S.-generated plastic waste ended up in coastal environments (within 50 km of a coastline) somewhere in the world.
 - 1.45 Mt would rank U.S. as third, globally, in its contribution to coastal plastic pollution.
 - 0.51 Mt would rank U.S. as 11th, globally, in its contribution to coastal plastic pollution.