THE STORY OF PLASTIC:
Animated Short

Annotated Script

You've probably heard about a giant trash island in the ocean,[1] or that poor sea turtle and the straw.[2] Maybe you've even heard how plastic is being found inside the fish we eat![3]

The plastic crisis gets a lot of attention. But the headlines usually focus on the plastic that ends up in the environment... and that's just part of the story. The truth is, plastic has a whole life cycle that's hidden from view – one that harms people and the planet from start to finish.

Let's start at the beginning. Plastic is made from fossil fuels like oil or fracked natural gas.[4] Extracting those fossil fuels – and turning them into plastics – creates a lot of pollution[5]… Pollution that most often affects marginalized communities nearby.[6]

As we've gotten better about using less oil and gas to power our lives, the fossil fuel industry found a lifeline in plastics.[7] In fact, oil & gas companies are doubling down on plastic production - with plans to build or expand over 300 petrochemical plants in the US alone by 2025.[8]

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[1] National Geographic. Great Pacific Garbage Patch. July 2019.

[2] Plastic Pollution Coalition. The Turtle That Became the Anti-Plastic Straw Poster Child. November 2015.

[3] Current Environmental Health Reports. Microplastics in Seafood and the Implications for Human Health. August 2016.

[4] Center for International Environmental Law. Fossils, Plastics, and Petrochemical Feedstocks. September 2017.

[5] Center for International Environmental Law. Plastic & Health: The Hidden Costs of a Plastic Planet. February 2019

[6] Union of Concerned Scientists. Double Jeopardy in Houston. August 2016.

[7] Center for International Environmental Law. Fueling Plastics: How Fracked Gas, Cheap Oil, and Unburnable Coal are Driving the Plastics Boom. September 2017.

[8] American Chemistry Council. U.S. Chemical Industry Investment Linked to Shale Gas Reaches $200 BillionU.S. Chemical Industry Investment Linked to Shale Gas Reaches $200 Billion. September 2018.

But these companies already produce more plastic than we can use - so where's all that plastic going? A lot of it's flowing into new markets in places like Asia, Africa and Latin America.[9]

Because more than any other product category, plastic isn't driven by the demand for it, but by the supply. Corporations like Unilever, Nestle and Procter & Gamble are aggressively marketing single-use plastic products around the world.[10][11]

These companies go to places like Indonesia - where I live - and push their products onto communities that just aren't prepared to deal with all that plastic. Maybe they're used to using natural packaging. Maybe they live on a tiny island without a system of waste collection. And on top of that, countries in the Global North are shipping their own plastic waste into these countries too![12]

When you add that all up, it's no wonder so much of this plastic ends up in the environment! And globally, that's where a whopping 32% of plastic packaging ends up. 40% goes to a landfill - where plastic just piles up for future generations to deal with. And 14% is incinerated...[13]

Incineration is a nasty business, producing toxic smoke and fly ash.[14] These super expensive facilities depend on plastic to burn everything else -- it oil and gas after all! – so they want to see more plastic, not less![15]

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[9] New York Times. Big Oil Is in Trouble. Its Plan: Flood Africa With Plastic. August 2020.

[10] Break Free From Plastic. BRANDED Volume III: Demanding Corporate Accountability for Plastic Pollution. December 2020.

[11] GAIA. Sachet Economy: Big Problems in Small Packets. July 2020.

[12] GAIA. DISCARDED: Communities on the Frontlines of the Global Plastics Crisis. April 2019.

[13] World Economic Forum. The New Plastics Economy: Rethinking the future of plastics. January 2016.

[14] GAIA. Fact Sheet: Plastic and Incineration. 2019.

[15] GAIA. The High Cost of Waste Incineration. 2020

Then there's recycling - Unfortunately, it's not the solution that many people think it is. Just 14% of plastic packaging gets recycled - and only 2% is effectively recycled… meaning it becomes something as useful as before. The rest is downcycled into something worse. And most recycled plastic is only recycled once before ending up in landfills, incinerators or the environment anyway.[16]

So it turns out that we can't burn, bury, or recycle our way out of this problem... and we can't just scoop all that plastic out of the environment either.[17] That's like trying to bail out a bathtub with a teaspoon, while the tap is on full blast!

So how about we turn off the tap by shutting down the plastic machine? That means passing policies that create systemic change. Like phasing out the single-use plastics that pollute the most, ending the fossil fuel subsidies that are fueling Big Plastic, and holding companies responsible for the plastic waste they create.[18]

That's how we can achieve our vision of a zero waste future where all of our products and packaging can be reused or repaired, effectively recycled, or composted…[19] And ultimately, how we create a sustainable, circular economy that works for both people and the planet.

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[16] World Economic Forum. The New Plastics Economy: Rethinking the future of plastics. January 2016.

[17] Dezeen. The Ocean Cleanup labelled "a dream that seduced many people." May 2019.

[18] Rethink Plastic. Reusable Solutions: How Governments Can Help Stop Single-Use Plastic Pollution. October 2019.

[19] GAIA. The Zero Waste Master Plan: A Guide to Building Just and Resilient Zero Waste Cities. 2020.