



BOTTLING IT

**THE FAILURE OF MAJOR SOFT DRINKS
COMPANIES TO ADDRESS OCEAN
PLASTIC POLLUTION**

GREENPEACE



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A PLASTIC OCEAN

Healthy oceans are essential to all life on earth. They are home to many of the world's most iconic species, absorb carbon from the atmosphere and provide the main source of protein for over one billion people.¹

Yet a truckload of plastic waste enters the ocean every single minute.² Plastic can take centuries to break down and is rapidly accumulating in the marine environment. In fact, there are five trillion pieces of plastic in our oceans today – enough to circle the Earth over 400 times.³

The impact on marine life is huge. Big pieces of plastic entangle species like whales, turtles and seabirds, whilst tiny pieces of plastic are mistaken for food – choking and poisoning marine animals. The United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) estimates that ocean plastics are responsible for the deaths of hundreds of thousands of sea creatures each year.⁴

But this problem isn't limited to our oceans: plastic is entering every level of the ocean food chain and even reaching our dinner plates. Recent studies have found microplastics in oysters, mussels and fish,⁵ with scientists highlighting the need for further research into the risks for human health.⁶

With plastic production set to double in the next 20 years and quadruple to 318 million tonnes by 2050,⁷ we need to curb the flow of plastics into our oceans and take drastic action to end the era of throwaway plastic. **Our oceans depend on it.**



Laysan Albatross and the contents of its stomach including several plastic bottle caps.
© Susan Middleton and David Liittschwager



PACKAGING AND THE PLASTIC BOTTLE PROBLEM

The last few decades have seen a rapid increase in the use of throwaway plastic packaging. Packaging now accounts for a quarter of the 245 million tonnes of plastic that are used globally each year,⁸ making it the single most common use of plastic.⁹ Just 14% of this plastic packaging is recycled globally, whilst a third of it escapes collection entirely,¹⁰ leaving it to pollute our streets, beaches and oceans.

PET (polyethylene terephthalate) bottles, most commonly used for soft drinks, make up the second largest category of plastic packaging used globally.

In 2014 alone 530 billion PET bottles were produced across the world¹¹ and their production is predicted to grow by 4.7% a year, meaning just shy of 650 billion plastic bottles are expected to be sold globally in 2019.¹² But whilst PET is one of the most economically feasible types of plastic to recycle, currently just over half of plastic bottles are recycled globally.¹³

Today throwaway plastic bottles and bottle tops are a very visible problem, on our beaches, in our rivers and on our streets. According to global surveys, they are the most common type of plastic packaging found washed up on the world's shorelines.¹⁴

Studies also show that plastic bottles are the second most commonly sighted type of plastic packaging on the ocean surface. These bottles floating on the surface represent just a fraction of the total drinks bottles polluting our seas, as research demonstrates that the majority of PET bottles will sink to the ocean floor.

To make matters worse, marine conditions mean that one soft drink bottle can take hundreds of years to fully degrade - with its chemical residues remaining in the ocean for even longer.¹⁵

GREENPEACE SURVEY RESULTS: MAJOR SOFT DRINKS COMPANIES ARE FAILING TO ACT ON OCEAN PLASTICS

Greenpeace has conducted the first ever comprehensive survey of the plastic usage and policies across the top six global soft drinks brands: Coca-Cola, PepsiCo, Suntory, Danone, Dr Pepper Snapple and Nestlé.

The survey results, detailed below, revealed a woeful lack of action by the soft drinks industry to prevent their plastic bottles ending up in our oceans.

Most major soft drinks brands are now taking action to tackle climate change, by reporting on their greenhouse gas emissions and developing plans to reduce their carbon footprint. But in stark contrast, Greenpeace's survey found that the same brands – which sell millions of tonnes of plastic bottles every year – are failing to even acknowledge their role in the ocean plastic problem, let alone take the ambitious action needed to tackle it.

The plastic footprint of the soft drinks sector

Of the six companies surveyed, five sell a combined total of just over 2 million tonnes of plastic bottles each year – the same weight as over 10,000 blue whales. When combined with their other plastic packaging this rises to a total of 3.6 million tonnes. This astonishing figure does not even include sales from soft drinks giant Coca-Cola, which refused to disclose how many tonnes of plastic it sells each year. As the world's largest soft drinks company – with sales of more than 1.9 billion drinks *per day*¹⁶ – Coca-Cola's unaccounted-for plastic usage makes the sector's actual plastic footprint much, much, larger.

Lightweighting: the plastic reduction red herring

None of the companies surveyed have commitments, targets or timelines to reduce the amount of single-use plastic bottles they use. Instead, most are focusing their efforts on 'lightweighting' – making PET bottles thinner to reduce costs, plastic-use and carbon emissions – or developing bioplastics which do not use oil as a source material.

However, lightweighting and bioplastics fail to tackle the problem of ocean plastics.

Lighter and bioplastic bottles still pose an ingestion and choking threat to marine life. They also still slowly break down into tiny pieces of plastic which can absorb toxic chemicals and contaminate the ocean food chain. Furthermore lightweighting efforts have fallen far short of compensating for the huge growth in total volumes of plastic bottles produced.

To truly combat marine plastic pollution companies must set targets to reduce the number of single-use plastic bottles they produce.

Poor plastic disclosure

Across the soft drinks industry there is inadequate reporting on plastic, with all six companies' annual reports failing to fully disclose the volume and types of plastic they use in their packaging.

Greenpeace's survey also elicited patchy responses to questions about company sales of plastic packaging and revealed gaps in company data on recycled content usage. This denies the basic level of transparency that is needed to start reducing the industry's plastic footprint.



Plastic bottle collected from the Thames Estuary, UK © Lovers / Greenpeace

What's more, four out of the top six companies surveyed do not even consider the impact of plastic bottles on oceans in their product design and development processes. Even worse, Dr Pepper Snapple completes no environmental assessment whatsoever on the impacts of plastic when developing new products.

Backtracking on refillable bottles

In several countries around the world, companies sell soft drinks in returnable, reusable bottles. This includes both glass bottles and PET formats which are used to refill water and soda up to 15 times before recycling.¹⁷

According to Zero Waste Europe refillable bottles have 50-60% lower global warming potential than single-use containers.¹⁸ Furthermore by reducing the sheer volume of bottles produced, the use of refillable bottles limits the number of plastic bottles at risk of entering rivers and oceans.

However, responses to Greenpeace's questions about where companies offer refillable bottles and what plans they have to increase their use revealed a worrying trend. Over the last ten years, soft drinks companies have generally been decreasing their use of refillable bottles, instead switching to yet more single-use plastic bottles.

Lack of research into alternatives to single-use plastic

To make the soft drinks sector more sustainable, companies must innovate and move beyond producing plastic bottles that are used once and then thrown away. However Greenpeace's survey found that there is very limited research from companies in this area. Research and development is generally focused on minimising the environmental impact of the raw materials, like oil, used to make single-use plastic. Soft drinks companies are paying very little attention to researching alternatives to single-use packaging, such as expanding the use of drink dispensers at stores and food outlets, or developing new types of reusable packaging.

Positive steps for problem plastics

Encouragingly, the survey revealed that the industry has made gains in removing so called 'problem plastics' from their drinks bottles – ie plastics that cannot be recycled, or are particularly toxic. For instance, companies have taken steps to switch to more recyclable bottle caps, and phase out PVC sleeves or labels that are difficult to recycle.

Failing to disclose or improve their use of recycled plastic

To seriously reduce their plastic footprint soft drinks companies need to dramatically cut the number of throwaway plastic bottles they produce. However, given the need for urgent action to reduce ocean plastic pollution, an interim step they can take is to make their bottles from 100% recycled plastic. This will help close the loop on bottle production, reduce wasted materials and energy and help stop them ending up in the ocean.

Every company surveyed encourages its customers to recycle and features recycling symbols on its plastic drinks bottles. Many also stress in their marketing materials that their bottles are '100% recyclable,' reflecting the fact that PET is one of the easiest plastics to recycle. However, most soft drinks brands do not publicly disclose how much recycled plastic (rPET) they use in their bottles.

The survey reveals that despite urging customers to be environmentally friendly, the top six soft drinks companies in the world use a combined average of just 6.6% recycled PET globally (excluding Coca-Cola, which did not disclose its global figures to Greenpeace). That equates to 14 times less recycled plastic than virgin plastic used across their global packaging.

Furthermore a third of the soft drinks brands surveyed (Dr Pepper Snapple and Suntory) currently have no targets to increase their use of rPET in their plastic bottles. The others only disclosed partial or draft targets covering a limited number of countries. None of the companies surveyed are aiming to use 100% rPET globally.

These companies know that selling drinks in 100% recycled PET bottles is achievable because they are already using them for 'niche' product ranges [see box], but low oil prices have made virgin plastic cheaper, so buying it over recycled material maximises short term profits. A knock-on result of this decision by soft drinks companies is that many recycling businesses have been forced to scale down their operations, due to inconsistent demand for recycled materials.

Back in 2007, Suntory's Ribena became the first major UK soft drink brand to use 100% recycled plastic. Then Naya Natural Spring Water started using 100% recycled plastic bottles in Canada in 2009, followed by PepsiCo's 7Up with 100% recycled 'EcoGreen' bottles in 2011. Hong Kong-based brand Watsons Water has offered customers 'Go Green' bottles since 2015 and Nestlé's Natural Spring Water began using 100% rPET bottles in the US in 2015.



WHAT DO SOFT DRINKS COMPANIES NEED TO DO?

It's clear that to protect the oceans we need to dramatically reduce our use of throwaway plastic packaging. To do this, we need companies that produce and sell vast amounts of plastic packaging to introduce policies and set targets to cut their plastic footprint and move towards a closed-loop system of production.

Greenpeace is calling on companies to accept their responsibility for ocean plastic pollution and commit to phase out the use of throwaway plastic packaging via the following steps:

- **Reduce and reuse - prioritise reusable packaging and developing delivery systems based on reuse.**
- **Recycle - ensure all remaining packaging is made from 100% post consumer recycled content, as well as being recyclable or compostable.**
- **Disclose - the types and amount of plastic they use, reuse and recycle.**

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Endnotes

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