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Yachtswoman: 'Planet is doomed' unless ocean improves

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Dee Caffari

(CNN) - She's witnessed awe-inspiring sights at sea, but yachtswoman Dee Caffari has also been left "dumbfounded" by the vast floating islands of plastic and rubbish she has seen in the world's oceans.

As the first woman to have sailed single-handedly around the world in both directions, Caffari has seen up close the harmful effects of man's activities, from global warming and the northward drift of icebergs in the Southern Ocean to the plastic pollution that is threatening ecosystems and impacting on the human food chain.

To help raise awareness of declining ocean health and add some science to the debate, Caffari is skippering the Turn the Tide on Plastic boat in this year's Volvo Ocean Race, sailing's premier around-the-world competition.

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"I feel very privileged to have the ocean as a playground and a work office, and yet I can see first-hand some of the damage we're doing," Caffari told CNN Sport.

"It's a realization by so many more people now that it's critical. If we actually don't do anything about it our planet is doomed."

'Get worse'

According to the Plastic Oceans website, 550 million plastic straws are thrown away every day in the US and the UK, while worldwide more than 500 million plastic bottles are used every year and more than one trillion plastic bags are discarded.

More than eight million tonnes of plastic are dumped into the ocean every year, according to the Ellen MacArthur Foundation (EMF). About 50% of it is used once and then discarded, and 91% never recycled.

"We've created this problem for our planet and unless we actively do something about it or stop using it or make manufacturing change it's only going to get worse," says the 44-year-old Caffari.

The 2016 report by the World Economic Forum (WEF) and the EMF said that if this trend continues at the same rate, there will be more plastic than fish in the ocean (by weight) by 2050.

Britain's Prince Charles told delegates at the recent Our Ocean summit in Malta it was crucial to create a circular economy that allows plastics to be "recovered, recycled and reused instead of created, used and then thrown away."

'Plastic is on the menu'

Much of the plastic waste in the world's seas tends to collect in one of five ocean gyres -- huge areas of circulating current and winds in which trash gathers.

During a recent race from Los Angeles to Hawaii, Caffari's boat skirted the edge of the North Pacific Gyre, known as the Great Pacific Garbage Patch.

"Every single day we were passing pollution, which was like having trash just thrown in the ocean, like fishing nets, floating crates, washing bowls, chairs, all sorts. It's sad," said Britain's Caffari.

"We're talking full islands worth, we're talking avoiding the area.

"The Americans with me were saying that it was better than it has been in the past but I was dumbfounded. It's ridiculous."

As well as the visible trash, scientists and environmentalists are worried about the level of micro-plastics in the ocean, minute pieces of plastic less than five millimeters in diameter.

These come from sources such as cosmetics, clothing and industrial processes as well as the breakdown of larger plastic items.

Fish, other sealife and birds mistake it for food. In turn, this plastic enters the human food chain and is ingested by us.

"Plastic is on the menu," warned Prince Charles in his speech in Malta.

To collect new data, Caffari's team will take water samples each day as they race 45,000 miles around the world in 11 legs across four oceans.

The exact location of each sample will be pinpointed by GPS and the results analyzed to build up a global map of micro-plastic concentration levels in the oceans.

"This real data has to be acted up on," says Caffari. "We often pay lip service to a lot of things, but hopefully this will be proactive and make change happen."

'Irony'

Caffari's entry in the Volvo Ocean Race, backed by principal partner the Mirpuri Foundation and the Ocean Family Foundation, is a vehicle for the United Nations Environment's Clean Seas campaign.

It is one of three entries -- alongside Team Vestas 11th Hour Racing, a program of The Schmidt Family Foundation, and AkzoNobel -- that put sustainability at the heart of the race, say organizers.

"Highlighting it and raising awareness is one thing, driving industry and government to legislate to make differences is another aspect and then increasing people to raise awareness of their own behaviors and making simple changes such as don't use straws and refill water bottles -- that kind of simple action cumulatively makes the big impact," says Caffari.

The irony of a race sponsored by a car manufacturer -- which flies people and equipment around the world, and which builds boats made of carbon -- is not lost on Caffari.

But she maintains the race itself is working hard to minimize its impact and leave a legacy, from not having straws, single-use water bottles, plastic cutlery or cable ties in the various global race villages, and proper rubbish recycling, to Volvo using a proportion of each sale of its new hybrid car to funding the study of micro-plastics at sea.

The race has pledged to reduce single-use plastic at its race villages by 80% this edition and ban it completely by 2019/2020.

At the recent America's Cup, Ben Ainslie's Land Rover BAR, with 11th Hour Racing as a principle partner, were vociferous campaigners of the sustainability and clean seas message, but the disparate ambitions of the fiercely competitive teams meant the message was not broadcast on a united front, despite the high profile of one of sailing's most prestigious events.

Given the Volvo Ocean Race is something of a "closed environment," Caffari insists the sustainability message is easier to project.

"They risk being looked at very critically, so they have to deliver," she says.

Time to act

The seven teams entered in the race are made up of mixed crews after a new rule for this edition of the race handed a numerical advantage to line-ups including women.

Caffari's 10-person crew is the most cosmopolitan with a 50-50 split of men and women. The focus is on youth, with six of the 10 never having sailed in the notorious Southern Ocean.

But for Caffari, who took part in the last edition of the race as part of the all-female crew on Team SAC, it is the youth of her team that is the most energizing, particularly in terms of raising awareness of ocean health.

"The synergy is very nice with this Turn The Tide on Plastic team with the focus on youth sailors," she says. "They realise it's their generation and their children that are going to have to action something to make a difference for the future."

The Volvo Ocean Race began with leg one from Alicante, Spain to Lisbon in Portugal on October 22.

There are also stopovers in Cape Town, Melbourne, Hong Kong, Auckland, Itajai in Brazil, Newport, Cardiff and Gothenburg with the finish in The Hague in June 2018.

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