

Ocean Talks 2018: Finding a solution to the plastic crisis

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The world is waking up to the fact that we have a serious problem with [plastic waste](#), but what is the solution? [Frederikke Magnussen](#), co-founder of the [Ocean Family Foundation](#), discussed the issues surrounding plastic with a carefully curated panel at the [Ocean Talks 2018](#)...

“This year’s buzzword, even between five- and thirteen-year-olds – is plastic. It is a word that has taken everybody by storm,” opened [Frederikke Magnussen](#), moderator of the Plastic Solution panel at Ocean Talks 2018. “We are aware that the oceans are in dire straits and one of the main reasons is because we are using too much plastic.”

In the last couple of years, our perfect plastic world has come crashing down around us. The lasting effects of the ‘Oil Age’ are already catastrophic, something the public are reminded of regularly, but now the message is to dedicate our combined efforts towards finding solutions, sharing and utilising them.



L-R: Sian Sutherland, Paul Crewe, Luisa Mirpuri, AJ Sutherland and Frederikke Magnussen

One of the key concerns is the effect of plastic on our health. The more that gets dumped into the ocean, the more that appears in our drinking water and food. Dr Luisa Mirpuri, co-founder of the Mirpuri Foundation, shared her knowledge of just how harmful it is. “Plastic comes from oil – 80% of oil production is dedicated to manufacturing plastic - and we want to create this galactic world of different products, [so we use] these additives, chemicals and toxicants,” she explained. “Our contamination now begins in the womb, we are the most polluted species on the planet – we found bisphenol pellets in umbilical cords and in 90% of pregnant women.”

Numerous illnesses can be made worse, or even caused, by a plastic-rich environment. There are more than 20,000 types of polymers (plastics) that the human body cannot metabolise but are still used in almost all aspects of modern life, from clothing to toiletries. “The human health story is going to be the driver for change because not everybody loves the ocean and understands and sees what is actually happening,” said Magnussen.

While the general public is becoming desensitised to stories of doom and gloom, the crucial aspect is understanding what can be done to alter these risks with small, day-to-day actions.



Plastic waste is a problem for human health as well as the environment. *Image courtesy of Shutterstock.*

“There are a lot of simple steps that we can do at user level – that’s important to understand,” said AJ Sutherland, chief officer of sailing yacht *Black Pearl*. “We can do it on a boat, and the boat itself is a little microclimate.” Sutherland realised that if everyone on board (including 25 crew members) were to drink the recommended three litres of water a day and they were providing 500ml water bottles, *Black Pearl* alone would use 55,000 single-use plastic bottles a year.

“We’ve implemented a filter system with a tap on board for the crew and permanent water bottles for crew members. You can make these simple choices. Everybody here can decide, from now, they’re never going to use a plastic bag ever again. We’ve done that with water bottles, we use concentrate, we buy in bulk and we’re trying, as a boat, to remove that single-use plastic.”

Looking at change on a grander scale, businesses that rely on the cheapness and preservation qualities of plastic are inevitably digging their heels in. “You think about the technology and change that has happened in the last 10 years, it’s dramatic. It’s absolutely incredible to see what’s happened,” said Paul Crewe, executive director and chief sustainability officer at Anthesis Group. “There are technologies and alternatives out there, but the rate of change is going to be a challenge.”



The panel discussed the issues around cutting plastic on a large scale

Crewe explained that price is an enormous factor for businesses, but that retailers would be forced to make changes if the masses made the choice to not buy products that use plastic. If the products aren't leaving the shelves, eventually they will be altered to meet popular demand.

However, this is an exceedingly slow process, especially in the UK. "We know what we're asking for isn't easy," said Sian Sutherland, co-founder of A Plastic Planet. "I understand about the length of supply chains and margins." When pitching the idea of a digital plastic-free isle to Amazon, the response was resistant, Sian explained. Until the public ask for it, it's simply not on the agenda.

But thanks to what retailers have dubbed 'The *Blue Planet* Effect', the public are ready for change. "We need to accelerate this pace, it's taking too long," said Sutherland, noting that Theresa May's 25-year environmental plan is not fast enough. "We talk about it a lot, but there is very little action... We need to vote with our wallets, to say 'no' to ever buying a plastic water bottle again."