Studienkreis
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Entwicklung e.V.

The Plastics Paradox

Billions of tons of plastic waste end up in the oceans every year. Tourism is both a culprit and a victim at the same time. An interview with Martina von Münchhausen of WWF.

Why does the world get suffocated by plastic waste?
Our global society is based on plastics. Everywhere it is used: in health care and sanitation, in engineering and production, in the food sector. However, we missed out on an early reflection on what would happen to the material when it has been used and is no longer needed. Short-term use is followed by an extremely long life cycle. Plastics do not decompose until decades or centuries later. Having ignored the problem for such a long time we now find an accumulated volume of 150 billion tons of plastics in the oceans – with devastating consequences for marine wildlife, ecosystems, and eventually our own health and livelihood.

And more and more of it is being produced – about 400 billion tons of plastics every year, which is 50 times as much as was produced 60 years ago.
Plastics cannot be replaced from one day to the next. Global production is steadily increasing, due to economic growth and life styles. Germany is no. 1 in Europe. And following China, Europe is the second biggest producer of plastics in the world. The key question is: Where do plastics find their ways into our environment? For only a small part of the plastic waste is treated properly, gets burned or recycled. If it ended up in a cycle, we would not be having these huge problems. Many countries, however, are not able to manage and dispose of the volumes of waste they generate. Especially in South East Asia, major parts of the plastics are not processed and rivers carry them into the oceans. In many places there is no waste management system at all. Waste is not even taken to landfills, but is simply dumped anywhere in nature or burnt illegally. In addition, some countries, such as currently mainly Malaysia, import additional waste from industrialised countries in order to get paid for processing it – which then often does not happen in legal ways. And in addition, the tourism boom in fragile holiday destinations worldwide exacerbates the problem.

Especially in the Mediterranean the situation is dramatic
Due to its geographic location and the lack of exchange of water, the

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Mediterranean increasingly becomes a trap for plastics, and especially for micro-plastics which are used in many cosmetics. The number of people who spend their holidays on the shores of the Mediterranean has risen to more than 300 billion and continues to increase. The Mediterranean has also become the most popular cruise destination after the Caribbean. All of this means that in the peak season the amount of plastics that end up in the sea increases by about 40 percent. The coasts are polluted especially in the vicinity of popular seaside resorts, to the increasing disgust and disturbance of tourists.

Tourism is therefore not only one of the culprits, but also a victim of the problem we have with plastics.

Every year, high costs are incurred in clean-up drives on beaches and in the removal of plastics from the sea and from coral reefs. Waste in the water and on the land spoils the holiday ambiance that tourists had been hoping to enjoy. Tourists are directly confronted with the problem which is no longer possible to ignore. The interlinkages between consumption, mass tourism and waste become evident, which is not so obviously the case with other negative impacts of tourism. The relationship between air travel to holiday destinations and climate change is often stoically ignored. When it comes to polluted landscapes on their holidays, many tourists feel an impulse to request tour operators or hoteliers to take action. Or they themselves would like to do something.

What can tour operators do, what do they need to do?

We had a discussion at the ”ITB Interjections“ event organised by Studienkreis where tour operators such as TUI Cruises and Thomas Cook were also present. If the tourism industry limits the use of plastics, e.g. by refraining from using plastic straws, bottles, and disposable coffee cups and by implementing this in all their hotel chains, it will have a major effect in terms of volumes. It means that some voluntary efforts are already being made. But these steps are far from sufficient and not as effective as they may sound. Business players still remain too stuck in their own world. When a country or a destination generates a major part of its income from tourism, the sector has as much power as it has responsibility. Tour operators would need to put more pressure on the destinations in which they do business. They would need to use their influence to lobby for an efficient infrastructure to manage waste and would need to contribute financially. For what is the benefit if the beaches in front of the hotels get cleaned regularly and if the garbage generated in the hotels gets segregated properly – but eventually ends up at an illegal waste dump? It might serve to maintain the holiday ambiance that tourists see, but conceals the system’s real weaknesses.

That's why WWF has initiated projects in several countries.
Especially in South East Asian countries with a lack of respective infrastructure we closely work with communities, authorities in the fields of environment and tourism, and political decision makers, often in collaboration with civil society organisations. Together we seek to improve the quality of waste management by implementing pioneer projects that can serve as models. For example, we are strongly involved on the Vietnamese island destination of Phu Quoc, which has seen a tremendous increase in tourism and which is now drowning in waste. Here we also try to get the private sector on board, especially hotels and restaurants.

Especially on cruise ships, too, waste has become a major challenge.
On board of a ship everything needs to be efficient, there is very little space. The waste generated during an entire cruise cannot be returned to the home port. When a ship anchors at a destination, there is often no possibility to dispose of the waste in proper manner. Some global shipping companies buy entire islands or build their private terminals at harbours. A lot of money is being invested. However, the companies should do more than just build shopping malls for tourists; they should also build waste management facilities which are lacking. The cruise industry pays fees for harbour infrastructure, but nobody knows exactly what will happen to the waste. In many cases private sub-contractors are in charge of waste disposal. Tourism happens in destinations all around the world; German legislation does not apply there.

The plan of the United Nations Environment Assembly (UNEA) in Nairobi to launch a global regulation has failed for now.
This is more than unfortunate, a compromise eventually failed because of two countries. Though the UN member states have passed a resolution on plastic litter in the oceans, the content remains vague and will only be discussed again in two years from now, in 2021. The UNEA is the highest decision-making body in international environmental politics. We need a binding global convention that will put an end to further marine pollution. We need international agreements to be implemented by countries. At the moment each country devises its own legislation.

At least the EU has adopted an agreement on plastics.
The plastics issue is worrying the population. According to a survey by Eurobarometer of 2017, about 87 percent of EU citizens regard it as a threat and would like to see a faster solution. The EU has reacted and has enacted a ban on certain single-use plastic products such as plates, cutlery, drinking straws, cotton buds, and swizzle sticks. The directive must be implemented in national

legislation by 2021. Plastic bottles have been exempted, but the share of recycling is to be increased. Furthermore, the producers' responsibility has been established. In the future producers will have to pay for the collection and waste management of certain products, particularly including plastic bottles.

WWF demands an expansion of producers' responsibilities, which should apply internationally.
The plastic waste on Asian beaches has been produced in America, Europe, and China. Companies that bring such products into circulation must ensure that their products are not just sold in a country, but that these countries also organise and finance the collection, sorting and recycling of used packaging and products. The disposal and treatment of waste is expensive and in many countries it is still financed by public funds, which, however, are often not sufficient, which leads to the problems we know. For example, producers could be forced by legislation to pay licensing fees for packaging, comparable to the dual system in Germany. A take back or deposit return scheme needs to be introduced to ensure that a product becomes part of a reuse cycle.

In Germany the dual system has also come under criticism for its low rate of reuse/recycling.
Indeed, there is a need for improvement in this system. The new packaging law which came into force in January 2019 envisages recycling rates of 63 percent by 2021. The share of the recycled material is still too small, a high percentage of the plastic waste is dirty and cannot be recycled. In many cases the packaging is not suitable for recycling. The basic idea behind our system of holding producers responsible is appropriate, though.

What is the role of consumers? Do we need to exercise more restraint?
Yes, we should. All that we do not necessarily need must be done away with. Does a hotel guest need several kinds of cosmetics in the bathroom? All this has become part of the standard, though it is superfluous. A visit to an illegal dumping site or garbage island in a destination would quickly convince us that many things we consume during our holiday are unnecessary and harmful and that it does not cost us any effort to refrain from using such items. This is a process of social development we are facing. In this process we should use our common sense and say goodbye to our expectations of entitlement and to our convenience.

Would it be a solution to substitute plastics by other materials?
There is a lot of research going on in this field. At the moment, there is not much that can be replaced. Materials from renewable resources entail very different

kinds of problems – monocultures and the use of soil, water, and energy. The ecological footprint of shopping bags and packaging materials from organic synthetics is not necessarily favourable. Furthermore, these items continue to perpetuate our throw-away mentality. We should to the best possible extent refrain from using single-use products of all kinds, instead of trying to find substitutes.

Giving up something often does not happen voluntarily.
That is why we need legislation. Policies play a major role, otherwise there will be hardly any implementation. It is welcome if companies do something on a volunteer basis as part of their social and ecological responsibility. Unfortunately, however, these are often measures that are suitable in public relations, but may not be very efficient. And back to the tourism industry: For the volumes of plastics to be reduced, we have to avoid whatever is not necessary. Furthermore, tourism businesses need to become more active politically if they want to protect their destinations and their own sector. The problem of waste does not end outside the hotel premises.

About Martina von Münchhausen: *An economist by academic training, Martina von Münchhausen is in charge of the tourism programme of WWF (World Wide Fund for Nature) Germany at the international WWF Centre for Marine Conservation in Hamburg. She works on the promotion and market development of sustainable tourism and on joint strategies with the tourism industry. Additional focus is on the reduction of the touristic footprint, especially the carbon footprint of tourism, and on the quality management of globally accepted tourism-related criteria for sustainability and the protection of biological diversity.*

In March 2019, as part of its annual „ITB Interjections“ events in Berlin, the Institute for Tourism and Development (Studienkreis für Tourismus und Entwicklung e.V.) initiated a discussion on ”The Plastics Paradox or Lifestyle hits Lifestyle. We are both culprits and victims of marine pollution“. The panellists included Victoria Barlow, Group Environmental Manager at Thomas Cook, Mark Hehir, CEO of The small Maldives Island Co (TSMIC), Wybcke Meier, CEO of TUI Cruises, and Martina von Münchhausen of WWF Centre for Marine Conservation.

Interview: Stephanie Arns