

THE AUSTRALIAN

WWF calls for treaty to rid ocean of plastic

By **STEPHANE ORJOLLET**

AFP

10:05AM FEBRUARY 8, 2022 •  42 COMMENTS

Plastic has infiltrated all parts of the ocean and is now found “in the smallest plankton up to the largest whale”, wildlife group WWF said on Tuesday, calling for urgent efforts to create an international treaty on plastics.

Tiny fragments of plastic have reached even the most remote and seemingly-pristine regions of the planet: it peppers Arctic sea ice and has been found inside fish in the deepest recesses of the ocean, the Mariana Trench, east of The Philippines.

There is no international agreement in place to address the problem, although UN delegates meeting in Nairobi this month are expected to launch talks on a worldwide plastics treaty.

WWF sought to bolster the case for action in its latest report, which synthesises more than 2000 separate scientific studies on the impacts of plastic pollution on the oceans, biodiversity and marine ecosystems.

The report acknowledged that there was insufficient evidence to estimate the potential repercussions on humans, but it found that the fossil-fuel derived substance “has reached every part of the ocean, from the sea surface to the deep ocean floor, from the poles to coastlines of the most remote islands and is detectable in the smallest plankton up to the largest whale”.

According to some estimates, between 19 to 23 million tonnes of plastic waste is washed into the world’s waterways every year, the WWF report said.

This is largely from single-use plastics, which still constitute more than 60 per cent of marine pollution, although more and more countries are acting to ban their use.

“In many places (we are) reaching some kind of saturation point for marine ecosystems, where we’re approaching levels that pose a significant threat,” said WWF manager Eirik Lindebjerg.

In some places there was a risk of “ecosystem collapse”. Many people had seen images of seabirds choking on plastic straws or turtles wrapped in discarded fishing nets, but he said the danger was across the entire marine food web.

It “will affect not only the whale and the seal and the turtle, but huge fish stocks and the animals that depend on those”, Mr Lindebjerg said.

In one study last year, 386 fish species were found to have ingested plastic, out of 555 tested.

Separate research, looking at the major commercially fished species, found up to 30 per cent of cod in a sample caught in the North Sea had microplastics in their stomach.

Once in the water, the plastic begins to degrade, becoming smaller until it is a “nanoplastic”, invisible to the naked eye. So even if all plastic pollution stopped completely, the volume of microplastics in the oceans could still double by 2050.

But plastic production continues to rise, potentially doubling by 2040, according to projections cited by WWF, with ocean plastic pollution expected to triple during the same period.

Mr Lindebjerg compared the situation to the climate crisis – and the concept of a “carbon budget” that caps the maximum amount of CO₂ that can be released into the atmosphere – before a global warming cap is exceeded. “There is actually a limit to how much plastic pollution our marine ecosystems can absorb,” he said.

Those limits have already been reached for microplastics in several parts of the world, – according to WWF, particularly in the Mediterranean, the Yellow and East China Seas – (between China, Taiwan and the Korean peninsula) and in the Arctic sea ice.

“We need to treat it as a fixed system that doesn’t absorb plastic, and that’s why we need to go towards zero emissions, zero pollution as fast as possible,” Mr Lindebjerg said.

WWF is calling for talks aimed at drawing up an international agreement on plastics at the Nairobi UN environment meeting from February 28 to March 2. It wants any treaty to lead to global standards of production and real “recyclability”.

Trying to clean up the oceans is “extremely difficult and extremely expensive”, Mr Lindebjerg said.

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