

PRESS RELEASE

Research reveals the devastating impact of plastic pollution in the Galapagos Islands



Galapagos sea lion with plastic around its neck © Andy Donnelly

Preliminary results from the last five years of plastic pollution research in Galapagos and the wider Eastern Tropical Pacific, released by Galapagos Conservation Trust ahead of the second meeting of the Intergovernmental Negotiating Committee for the future Global Plastics Treaty in Paris, have revealed that the famous Archipelago and its wildlife are under siege from plastic pollution.

Key findings include:

- More than **2,500 microplastics per m²** were found on the most polluted beaches in Galapagos¹
- **52 species** were found to have been entangled in or ingested plastic; 20 of these species are endemic to the Islands²
- **52% of Galapagos marine invertebrates** sampled contained microplastics³
- 69% of identifiable plastics found on Galapagos coastlines are $\ensuremath{\text{single-use}}\xspace$ items⁴
- 40% of plastic pollution in Galapagos is from maritime sources (compared to 20% globally)⁴
- 1/3 of single-use items found on Galapagos beaches are linked to **drinks**³
- More than 95% of the plastic found in Galapagos is likely to originate **outside the Marine Reserve**³

The Galapagos Archipelago is one of the most pristine ecosystems in the world, but even here, the devastating effects of plastic pollution are plain to see. In the last five years, Galapagos National Park rangers have removed **80 tonnes** of plastic waste from the Archipelago's beaches, the vast majority of it originating outside the Galapagos Marine Reserve.

At least 52 different species, both on land and in the sea, have been found to be entangled in plastic, living in affected habitats or having ingested plastic after mistaking it for food. This includes iconic endemic species such as the **Galapagos giant tortoise**, the **marine iguana** and the **waved albatross**.

Oceanographic modelling and fieldwork carried out with GCT's support suggests that the majority of plastic washing up in Galapagos is coming either from the coastlines of mainland Ecuador and Peru, or from fishing fleets operating in the Eastern Pacific.

Fishing gear lost at sea, so-called 'ghost gear', is a major problem, with loose nets and fishing lines continuing to entangle and kill marine life as it drifts through the ocean. Fish aggregating devices (FADs) pose a similar threat, with only an estimated 10% of drifting FADs ever retrieved by the fishing fleets that deploy them. General domestic plastic waste is also being found at sea in significant quantities, both within countries' Exclusive Economic Zones and on the High Seas, in contravention of international maritime law.



Green turtle entangled in plastic © Jonathan Green

"Nowhere is more emblematic than Galapagos of what we stand to lose if we don't act to stem the tide of plastic," commented Dr Jen Jones, Interim CEO of Galapagos Conservation Trust. "These findings demonstrate the unfair burden that is being placed on remote island communities by an influx of international plastic waste, with coastal clean-ups coming at a considerable economic cost, diverting funds away from local communities and conservation. We are calling on world leaders to agree an ambitious, legally-binding Global Plastics Treaty that bans single-use plastics and accelerates the transition to a circular economy where virgin plastic production is minimised, waste is eliminated and products are designed to be reused, repaired and repurposed."

NOTES TO EDITORS:

- Galapagos Conservation Trust (GCT) is the only UK charity to focus exclusively on the conservation and sustainable development of the Galapagos Archipelago. We deliver programmes that fill gaps in scientific knowledge, fund local scientists, NGOs and community groups, and partner with Ecuadorian authorities. We are working with local partners, national governments and our Pacific Plastics: Science to Solutions (PPSS) regional network with the aim of ensuring that the future instrument on plastic pollution brings with it the changes and actions that the world needs. To find out more, visit: galapagosconservation.org.uk
- Later this year we will publish our full report on the last five years of plastic pollution research in Galapagos please sign up to receive your copy: <u>https://forms.gle/P7MWG1DQmMZchwVR9</u>

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¹ Jones, J., Guézou, A., Medor, S., Nickson, C., Savage, G., Alarcón-Ruales, D., Galloway, T.S., Muñoz-Pérez, J.P., Nelms, S.e., Porter, A., Thiel, M., Lewis, C. (2022). Microplastic distribution and composition on two Galápagos island beaches, Ecuador: verifying the use of citizen science derived data in long-term monitoring. *Environmental Pollution*, Volume 311. <u>https://doi.org/10.1016/j.envpol.2022.120011</u>

² Muñoz-Pérez, J.P., Lewbart, G.A., Alarcón-Ruales, D., Skehel, A., Cobos, E., Rivera, R., Jaramillo, A., Vivanco, H., Zurita-Arthos, L., Wallace, B., Valle, C.A., Townsend, K.A. (2023). Galápagos and the Plastic Problem. *Frontiers in Sustainability*, Volume 4. <u>https://doi.org/10.3389/frsus.2023.1091516</u>

³ Jones, J., Porter, A., Muñoz-Pérez, J.P., Alarcón-Ruales, D., Galloway, T.S., Godley, B.J., Santillo, D., Vagg, J., Lewis, C. (2021). Plastic contamination of a Galapagos Island (Ecuador) and the relative risks to native marine species. *Science of the Total Environment*, Volume 789. <u>https://doi.org/10.1016/j.scitotenv.2021.147704</u>

⁴ Plastic Pollution Free Galapagos (2023). 5 Years of Science to Solutions. [Manuscript in preparation]