

BLUE REEF BLOG: BLUE PLANET & THE PLASTIC PROBLEM



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When Blue Planet II hit our screens in 2017, it was the most watched programme of the year – reaching over 14 million viewers. This was the first clue that this was the beginning of something wonderful.

When the original Blue Planet was aired in 2001, it was also well received but fell short of the viewing figures of the sequel. However, with millions of viewers tuning in, even in 2001, it proved that the nation was showing huge interest in the natural world despite the distractions of the early “noughties” such as the start of the Harry Potter films, Dido being at the height of fame and The Weakest Link still being on our screens.

Blue Planet II showed us life under the sea in a way that we had never

seen before, but it also showed how at risk this unique ecosystem is from human activity. Most notably it was highlighted that plastic pollution was taking over the oceans and we a very real, current threat to marine creatures.

So, why is plastic such an issue?

Plastic was originally invented over 100 years ago. It was made to easily moulded into different shapes, hard wearing and rot-proof. At the time, this was an incredible breakthrough and revolutionised the way that we lived. Now, we see plastic in almost everything and the characteristics that made it so useful are now the reason that it is so problematic.

It has reached the point now where we must sit up and listen. It's

estimated that by 2050 there will be more plastic than fish in the ocean – that is ridiculous. It's thought that the human race have created over 8 billion tonnes of plastic since its invention and that the vast majority of that is ending up in landfill and polluting the environment.

It is believed that up to nearly 13 million tonnes of plastic end up in the world's oceans each year. This is an incredible amount. Think about what we could do with all that waste if we were able to reuse it effectively. Not only would we be saving the oceans but we would also be able to create a circular economy which would be beneficial to us all.

One of the things that shocked me when watching Blue Planet II was the

section about the number of shipping containers lost at sea during transit. According to the programme, an estimate 4 shipping containers a day are lost overboard and pollute the oceans. I could barely believe this and to be honest it made me quite angry.

Blue Planet II used an example of a shipment of rubber ducks that was lost in the Arctic ocean. These ducks were still showing up on shorelines as far spread as Russia, Australia, and Scotland up to 15 years later.

Now, the reason this made me so angry was that if the equivalent was being lost off a truck or a freight train then we would be doing everything we could to prevent it. The effect on the environment and the financial loss would be enough for us to make changes and to stop it happening. Yet, because this is happening out of sight at sea and not on our doorsteps, this is an ongoing problem that is seen as an unfortunate part of the process. It's absurd.

The image of the rubber ducks is a striking one that has stuck in my mind, and the minds of many across the UK. Blue Planet II did a fantastic job of educating the nation and to make environmental issues, such as plastic pollution, a mainstream topic. The exposure the programme gave to these issues has been invaluable and has caused what is widely called 'The Blue Planet Effect', which is helping real change to be made.

However, lost shipping containers are the tip of the iceberg when it comes to pollution in our seas. Divers around the globe have reported seeing plastic pollution in all corners of the world.

From plastic bottles to ghost nets and fishing gear, to microplastics and more. Plastic pollution is a widespread issue that clearly needs to be addressed.

Types of plastic pollution:

Basically, if it is plastic and disposed of then it can easily end up in the ocean. Below I have outlined a few everyday items or problematic products that are often found in the sea.

1) Carrier bags – we have become much better with reducing the amount of carrier bags that we use. With the introduction of the 'bag for life' and the additional charge to use a traditional carrier bag. Most people now rarely do a shop without their reusable bags and being mindful about the bags we use as part of everyday life. This is a huge leap forward.

2) Ghost nets and fishing gear – often when fishing gear, such as fishing nets, get old they are either lost or disposed of at sea. These then entangle a variety of marine life, from seals to sea birds, turtles, crustaceans and even creatures as large as whales. These animals often die from drowning when they cannot return to the surface to breathe or sometimes from exhaustion from the effort of swimming with the entangled gear. Discarded fishing gear can also cause injury to marine life that can result in death and needless suffering.

3) Microplastics – you will be familiar with these from numerous headlines about marine creatures that have swallowed so much plastic that they

have either died from the ingestion or died from starvation caused by a blockage. More and more we are seeing images of sea birds, whales and fish that have died through mistakenly eating these tiny pieces of plastics that are filling our oceans. Microplastics are formed when the plastic in the oceans starts to breakdown. As it was made to be hard wearing and rot resistant, it doesn't truly biodegrade. Instead, it just breaks into smaller and smaller pieces that end up being ingested by marine life that mistakes them for their usual prey.

4) Drinking straws – these have been another plastic product that has made headlines since Blue Planet 2 aired. It is thought that in the UK alone we throw away near 4.5 million plastic straws per year. Statistics like this attracted the attention of the UK population and has seen many high street restaurants and cafes opt to change to either no straws or non-plastic alternatives such as paper or metal.





The original success of Blue Planet eventually led to Blue Planet II. This showed that there was an appetite for this type of programming and the action that has been taken – all over the UK (and the world) since it has aired is astounding. Now, BBC is currently (late March 2019) showing Blue Planet Live and Blue Planet UK to highlight what is being done and the incredible impact that Blue Planet II had and continues to have.

Our oceans are facing threats from many different angles. From overfishing, plastic pollution, climate change, and coral bleaching. There are many things to fear and many ways that the oceans have to struggle to maintain their health and biodiversity. There is so much about our oceans that we do not know about and it would be a shame to lose it before we understand the mysteries that it holds.

Raising awareness of plastic pollution and making it a mainstream issue that can be spoken about at home is a vital step forward to getting the majority of the population rallying against environmental issues and forcing politicians to act. Hopefully, by making people aware of this one issue, it will spark interest for more people to learn about the intricacies of the issues the planet is facing.

Education is the first step towards creating substantial change and help our lives on this planet become more sustainable. But it is the first step of many, and change cannot come soon enough. As I said before, it is thought that by 2050 that there will be more plastic in the ocean than fish – which we simply cannot allow to happen.

Our planet, planet Earth, is our home. It is our blue planet. 71% of the Earth is water. It's where we all began, and we owe it the decency to look after it as best we can. If we know what the problem is – and we do – then we should be doing everything we can to make changes to put it right.

The plight of our planet is no longer a secret that politicians don't want you to know about. Thanks to programmes like Blue Planet II, it is now a mainstream concern and ignorance is no longer a viable excuse. We cannot afford to wait any longer to change. This time is now.

We can't all change the world, but we can make changes to our worlds to influence each other to do our best. Get a reusable bag, say no to plastic straws, take a reusable mug to the coffee shop, buy products with recyclable packaging – small, simple things that you can start doing today to ensure a better world for tomorrow.

For now, tune into documentaries. Make it a habit to educate yourself in issues that are affecting the planet. Join the Blue Planet Revolution and be on the right side of history.

