

Study Guide - UNEP (UNEA)

Topic: Plastic in the seven seas

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Introduction to the topic

Just as the world's population continues to grow, so does the volume of debris that people produce. The common on-the-go lifestyle depends upon easily disposable products, like soda cans or bottles of water, however the accumulation of such products has led to increased numbers of plastic pollution around the world.

Because plastic is composed of major toxic pollutants, it has the capacity to cause significant harm to the environment. The build-up of synthetic plastic products in the environment will therefore at a certain point begin to create problems for local wildlife and their habitats as well as for humans. This is what is called plastic pollution.

Today the average consumer comes into daily contact with several kinds of plastic materials that have been developed to defeat the natural decay process. Because of this, synthetic plastics are primarily nonbiodegradable and therefore tend to persist in natural environments. Moreover, a lot of the plastic is making its way into environments where it is harmful, it is not disposed properly i.e. in landfills or recycling centres. Instead, many dispose of plastic material at or near the location where it is no longer useful to them.

In addition, according to the trade association PlasticsEurope, world plastic production grew from around 2 million tonnes per year in 1950 to approximately 275 million tonnes by 2010 and 381 million by 2015, of this between 4,8 million and 12,7 million tonnes are discarded into the oceans annually by countries with ocean coastlines.

The Committee

The United Nations Environmental Program (UNEP) is the world's top program when dealing with the environment. Once every two years the UNEP hosts the UN Environment Assembly (UNEA), which determines the goals and projects for the UNEP, and this assembly is therefore the highest-level body, when it comes to decision-making on the environment. This committee will simulate the UNEA.

UNEP does not have the ability to demand anything or force a nation or region to follow its goal or resolutions as it is only an advising body which provides leadership, inspiration, information and ability to the international community, nations and regions. Furthermore, the UNEP encourages the cooperation with other organisations and universities and they have a long list of partners who they cooperate with themselves. This list includes, Technical University of Denmark (DTU), World Conservation Monitoring Centre (WCMC) and Global Resource Information Database GRID.

The issue

As seen in the section "introduction to the topic", plastic pollution is a great issue. Roughly 8 mil. pieces of plastic is thrown into the world's oceans every day. Seeing that most plastic is not biodegradable, it does not disappear by itself, when thrown into the ocean, but it gathers to form trash/plastic islands (the largest one is located between Hawaii and California and is three times the size of France), it washes ashore or it floats around by itself. This creates multiple issues, which needs to be handled:

The most obvious problem is concerning wildlife and their habitat. Sea-creatures tend to get tangled up in plastic or mistaking it for food. In fact, studies have shown that 100% marine turtles, 59% of whales, 36% of seals and 40% of seabird contain plastic as a result of plastic pollution and it is estimated that 100.000 marine

mammals and 1 million seabirds die annually because of plastic. Furthermore, is the ocean wildlife's habitat being ruined by plastic, because it takes up space, but also because of the plastic molecules which the water around plastic islands will obtain. This causes fish and marine plants to obtain plastic even though they do not consume it.

The fact the marine wildlife obtains plastic also affects humans in a number of ways. First of all, humans do consume fish, which means human consume plastic. 1 in 3 fish caught for human consumption contains plastic and not unlike fish and turtles, the human body can not degrade plastic and it is toxic. Over time the global fishing industry will take a hit as a result of plastic pollution, because the fish they catch are not 100% edible.

Yet another consequence of plastic pollution, is when debris washes ashore. When people want to go to a beach they imagine a blue sea and a plain, clean bed of sand, but with plastic-debris levels rising, in the future that is not the sight that awaits. Because some of the plastic thrown into the ocean is bound to return to land beaches and shores will also contain pieces of plastic. In fact, approximately 5.000 pieces of marine plastic have been found pr. mile of beach in the United Kingdom. This is bad news for nations relying on their beaches, because tourists are a great part of their economy. No clean beaches equals fewer tourists.

The sources of the issue is humans. There is an estimate of 269.000 tons worth of plastic in the oceans (roughly 51 trillion pieces of plastic) and because plastic is non-organic, all of it is dumped by humans. Land based sources, such as littering on beaches and in rivers, industries and near-coastal bins, are responsible for approximately two-thirds of this plastic. The remainder is caused by plastic being dropped of ships, such as containers or fishing gear. Do to sunlight and seawater, these plastic objects are broken down into smaller pieces. In fact plastic can be found in so microscopic pieces that zooplankton are able to ingest them. And they do. This is not a good thing for humans, seeing that scientists believe that 50-85% of the earth's oxygen comes from plankton.

Plastic pollution is a great issue, threatening everything from the world's oxygen levels to nations economies to the environment. These issues will hopefully be fix doing committee sessions.

Work in the committee

The nations present at this UN environmental assembly will be:

- Argentina
- Brazil
- The Democratic Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka
- France
- Germany
- The Kingdom of Denmark
- The Kingdom of Iceland
- The Kingdom of Thailand
- The People's Republic of China
- The Republic of Côte d'Ivoire (the Ivory Coast)
- The Republic of South Africa
- The Russian Federation
- United Kingdom
- United Mexican States
- United States of America

Countries will work together in session to priorities and solve the aforementioned issues. This will be done through debate and the creation of working papers and draft resolutions according to the rules of procedure. Seeing that different countries have different opinions, it will only be possible to reach an agreement through compromise. It is therefore of great importance to sort out your nation's priorities and negotiate with what is negotiable and there will be clashing opinions in this committee. It is the UNEA's job to sort them out, so a thorough resolution most countries can agree to can be passed. As earlier mentioned, the UNEP can not force

a nation to commit to anything, so it is important for the committee to pass a resolution a lot of nations will commit to.

The debates of this committee should:

1. Discuss the magnitude of the different presented issues.
2. Determine if and what precautions should be taken to stop the flow of plastic going into our oceans.
3. Decide if and what measures should be taken to battle the consequences of the current amount of plastic in the seas.

As aforementioned, a draft resolution has to be drafted (and hopefully passed), which should also include these points and which can only include points raised in formal debate (in committee session).

Possible solutions

First and foremost a solution must address the root cause of plastic pollution and what or whether to anything about it. However, due to the scale of marine plastic pollution, the cost of removing synthetic plastic from the environment could prove prohibitive. The solution to the problem of plastic in the oceans should therefore focus on preventing illegal and inappropriate disposal of synthetic plastic items. A possible solution could also consider whether to limit the use of particular plastic items in the first place. Lastly a solution should also consider what impact the engagement of the general public and businesses in the fight against marine plastic pollution could have.

Previous work

With the purpose of addressing land based based pollution, that is pollution that originates on land, the UNEP hosts the secretariat for the Global Programme of Action for the Protection of the Marine Environment from Land-based activities (GPA), which was established in 1995. The GPA is the lone global intergovernmental mechanism directly addressing the connectivity between terrestrial, freshwater,

coastal and marine ecosystems. Since 2012, the work of the GPA has been focused on building and strengthening voluntary multi stakeholder partnerships on nutrient pollution, marine litter and wastewater.

The UNEP also supports protecting areas created with the purpose of conserving, managing and protecting marine resources. To this end, the UNEP aids the local governments in approving the effectiveness and equitable use of marine areas by providing technical expertise and capacity building support on governance of protected marine areas, and their use within wider integrated ocean and coastal management systems.

The most important campaign that the UNEP has launched, with the purpose of removing plastic from the oceans, is the Clean Seas campaign (#Cleanseas on social media). The UNEP launched the campaign back in 2017, with the goal of engaging governments, the general public and private businesses in the fight against marine plastic pollution. The campaign hopes to address the root-cause of marine pollution by targeting the production and consumption of nonbiodegradable, single-use and non-recoverable plastics. To do this effectively, the campaign need citizens to be aware, engaged and active in addressing the problem in their daily lives and beyond.

Blockpositions

This committee should form three blocks of countries. The countries who do not see an issue, the countries who want to solve the issues and the countries who needs to solve the issues.

The countries who do not see an issue either does not care about the environment or needs plastic for their industry and will therefore be against anything that will keep them from using plastic or create an extra expense. These countries will try to underplay plastic pollution and make it harder for the other countries to create major projects to lessen plastic pollution.

The countries who want to solve plastic pollution are mostly wealthy European countries. These nations do not feel the consequences of plastic pollution on themselves (in any major degree), but they acknowledge the problems and will do what they can to benefit from any solutions. This means that these countries will try to drag new types of businesses and research projects to their part of the world to benefit economically from the solutions presented in the draft resolution.

The last group is made up of third world countries with a coast, who depend on tourists. These countries are first in line when it comes to feeling the consequences of plastic pollution and will try to push the western world to go as far as possible to keep the oceans clear of plastic. This is the case because they are not financially capable of doing much themselves but depend on fishing as an industry and clean beaches and coastlines for tourists to enjoy.

Further reading/sources

- <https://www.unenvironment.org/about-un-environment/why-does-un-environment-matter/secretariats-and-conventions>
- <https://web.unep.org/environmentassembly/un-environment-assembly-and-governing-council>
- <https://www.sas.org.uk/our-work/plastic-pollution/plastic-pollution-facts-figures/>
- <https://ourworldindata.org/plastic-pollution>
- <https://www.unenvironment.org/explore-topics/oceans-seas/why-do-oceans-and-seas-matter>
- <https://www.plasticseurope.org/en>
- <https://www.cleanseas.org/>
- <https://www.britannica.com/science/plastic-pollution/Plastic-pollution-in-oceans-and-on-land>
- <https://earthsky.org/earth/how-much-do-oceans-add-to-worlds-oxygen>