

# Opinion: My team found 2,000 plastic bags inside a dead camel

Washington Post Opinion by Marcus Eriksen

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***Marcus Eriksen is director of research and co-founder of the 5 Gyres Institute.***



Emaciated camels graze through trash near Dubai. (Ulrich Wernery/Central Veterinary Research Laboratory)

Digging between the ribs of a dead camel buried in the sands of Dubai, I couldn't believe what my colleagues and I found: a mass of plastic bags as big as a large suitcase. At least 2,000 plastic bags were lumped together where the animal's stomach would have been. We had been led to the site by Ulrich Wernery of the Dubai-based Central Veterinary Research Laboratory, who knew we were researching floating plastics in the Persian Gulf region. After two decades at sea, I thought I had seen it all. We had traveled from the Arctic to the Antarctic, publishing research on plastic pollution across all the oceans' garbage patches. We found plastic microbeads in the Great Lakes. We have seen

albatrosses full of plastic on Midway Atoll, fish with microplastics in their stomachs and California sea lions with nooses of fishing line around their necks.

But the camels were a whole new level of appalling. Our team of scientists [documented](#) that more than 300 camels in the region around Dubai had died from eating humans' trash, accounting for 1 percent of dead camels evaluated in the region since 2008. Unlike other research that might examine animals in a laboratory, this was a field study with concentrations of plastic trash that currently exist in the environment. It is a real-world tragedy with ecologically relevant concentrations of trash.

Imagine having 50 plastic bags in your stomach that you could not digest, causing ulcers and tremendous discomfort and the feeling that you're full, all the time. You can't and don't eat any food. This is what happens to camels, and it results in intestinal bleeding, blockages, dehydration, malnutrition and death.

Much of the world still perceives plastic pollution as a problem limited to the ocean. Last month, U.N. Secretary General António Guterres opened the gathering of the United Nations Environmental Assembly, the world's top environmental decision-making body, by warning that the "oceans are filling with plastic," and [left it at that](#).

This is wrong. The camels are only the latest casualties occurring in all environments on this planet due to plastic. Researchers have also [observed](#) death and suffering in animals from [elephants to reindeer](#). They have found plastic fragments [in farmland](#), food and [drinking water](#). Another recent report drawing on the results of more than 30 studies calls attention to [the damage](#) that a chemical found in plastic may do to babies' brains. Plastic has even been [seen in Earth's orbit](#).

We have to stop talking about plastic pollution as if it were confined to our oceans and start talking about global plastic pollution harming life everywhere. We have a plastic pollution pandemic from the tops of mountains to the bottom of the sea. A limited view limits our ability to solve the problem.

The industries that make plastic bags would like you to think we can recycle our way out of this problem, but they resist any legislative requirement to [use recycled plastic in new products](#). Therefore, few companies use significant amounts of recycled plastic, and our recycling system fails to find markets for all the plastic packaging we send its way. Why? Because [new plastic is cheaper](#), especially when taxpayers cover the true cost to manage trash, pull plastic bags out of trees and fences, and clean up storm drains and beaches. In other words, the public subsidizes cheap, single-use, throwaway plastics, with all the benefits going to businesses. If recycling is going to work, we must commit to using recycled plastic and design for recyclability in the first place.

The world has had enough. National organizations and businesses are calling for a binding U.N. treaty on plastic pollution that would eliminate the most harmful plastic products and packaging and adopt innovations for reusable alternatives that are proving to work in cities everywhere. One example: Many start-ups are creating business models

for the reuse economy, from [reusable mailers](#) to [reusable](#) to-go boxes for takeout. The future is all about creating zero-waste models that don't burden citizens with having to pay for the negative externalities of excessive-waste management.

Corporate leaders and the Biden administration should fully support the U.N. treaty on plastic pollution as a critical step toward ending the harm of plastic waste. And they should affirm that plastic pollution is causing harm to life of all kinds everywhere — on land and at sea. Humans included.