

The Devastating Impact of Plastic Waste: David Attenborough, Britain and “Environmental Missions”

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Featured image: Sir David Attenborough (Source: Wikimedia Commons)

*Few documentaries have had quite this impact, so much so that it has ushered in the unfortunate combination of war and plastic, two terms that sit uneasily together, if at all. Tears were recorded; anxiety levels were propelled as Sir David Attenborough tore and tugged at heart strings in his production *Blue Planet II*. The oceans, warned the documentary maker, is becoming a toxic repository, and humans are to blame.*

More than [eight million tons](#) of plastic eventually finds an oceanic destination. Decomposition will take centuries. For Attenborough, [one scene from the series](#) stood out.

“In it, as snowflakes settle on the ground, a baby albatross lies dead, its stomach pierced by a plastic toothpick fed to it by its own mother, having mistaken it for healthy food. Nearby lies plastic litter that other hungry chicks have regurgitated.”

For Attenborough, plastic supplies a certain demonology for the environmental movement, a vast and urgent target that requires mass mobilisation and action.

“There are fragments of nets so big they entangle the heads of fish, birds, turtles, and slowly strangle them. Other pieces of plastic are so small that they are mistaken for food and eaten, accumulating in fishes’ stomachs, leaving them undernourished.”

To firstly declare war against something deemed valuable, even indispensable, to preservation, distribution and storage over a multitude of products, to name but a few purposes, is lofty. To also identify the casus belli against the inanimate again finds haunting resonance with other failed conflicts: the war against drugs, for instance, or that against terrorism. Will this war go the same way?

Guilty consciences are powerful motivators, and fewer guiltier than the affluent, or mildly affluent. Britain’s Prime Minister Theresa May is one, a figure who has decided to embrace the environmental cause with vote grabbing enthusiasm.

“In the UK alone,” she intoned, “the amount of single-use plastic wasted every year would fill 1,000 Royal Albert Halls.”

May's direction is far from surprising. There is Attenborough propelling a movement, and there are the votes that went begging in 2017. A Tory think-tank, Bright Blue, found that many who refused to vote for her party in the last general election considered environmental initiatives key. [Its polling](#) "shows that climate change is the second highest issue younger people want senior politicians to discuss more, second only to health, and actually the top issue for 18- to 28-year-olds."

In getting on the cart against plastic, May has attempted, unconvincingly, to reassure critics that moving Britain out of the EU would not result in a lowering of environmental standards. Britannia will remain responsible. Her government, [she spoke](#) with confidence at London Wetland Centre, would "leave the natural environment in a better state than we found it".

What Sir David says, goes, though May has suggested a [slow approach](#) that would eradicate all avoidable plastic waste in the UK by 2042. (What, then, is unavoidable? The question remains unanswered.) "Plastic-free" aisles are to be encouraged; taxes and charges on takeaway containers are being proposed. None of these, it should be noted, entails Parliamentary regulation, retaining the old British approach of gradualism in action. No revolutions, please.

Supermarket chains smell climbing profits, luring the ecologically minded to shelves and fridges like willing prey. One such outlet is Iceland, a chain that wasted little time getting on the radio and airwaves to ride the green belt. Targets have been advertised, and it promises to remove plastic packaging from all its own labelled products over the next five years. Even better, goes the fine print, it will enable those with less heavily laden wallets to shop and stay green.

Companies such as [Proctor & Gamble](#), makers of Head & Shoulders Shampoo, have collaborated to produce a recycled shampoo bottle using plastic found in beaches. This, in turn, pads out its advertising campaigns. Use our shampoo, and feel good about yourself.

The guilty consciences were whirling and emoting on BBC Radio 4 on Tuesday as callers spoke of efforts to spend a week free of plastic, but ignobly failing before their friends, neighbours and fellow citizens, all of whom had managed to go one day further. There were accounts about how French and German supermarkets ensure that fruits and vegetables are free, emancipated from the confines of plastic, and, it would seem, ready to salve the conscience of the green consumer.

In Britain, Attenborough's environmental influence has become priestly for such individuals as Oswestry schoolteacher Mandy Price. She has roped her daughter in as well in what has become a social media campaign featuring #doitfordavid, shared 125,000 times within a matter of hours.

"It has been shared on every continent apart from Antarctica," praises Emily Davies of the [Border Counties Advertiser](#).

This arms race of satisfying a bruised conscience has an undeniable merit in so far as it acknowledges some of the disastrous consequences of humanity's addiction to the accessible and the easy. Ambitious [Mandy](#), for instance, speaks of her Facebook page "receiving photographs from lots of different people who are collecting plastic, even from holidaymakers in Cuba who have seen the posts and have recorded their own two-minute

beach clean on the beautiful oceans there.”

But within such wars lie the seeds of, if not failure, then the coming of another problem. In the British case, [enduring snobbery](#) is pointed to. In Australia’s Northern Territory, [environmental groups](#) conceded in dismay that a ban single-use plastic bags less than 35 microns in thickness introduced in 2011 had not reduced plastic bag litter at all. On the contrary, the amount had *increased*.

This is a battle against human behaviour, against patterns of consumption and use in the human estate. It is, if nothing else, an attempt at behavioural adjustment and revolution. Such a tall order, such a mission, but one that provides Mandy with rosy affirmation rather than dimming scepticism.

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