

# How Garfield Became an Environmental Mascot | Earth911.com

## How Garfield Became an Environmental Mascot



Here's the story of Garfield the cat, who became France's ocean pollution Smokey the Bear.

Many people fail to engage with environmental issues because the scale of the problem is too big to wrap their heads around. Just as Smokey the rescued bear cub became a symbol for fire safety in the 20th century, [Garfield the cartoon cat](#) has become a symbol in France for the impact that unconscious consumerism has on the environment.

A plastic novelty phone has got the French thinking twice before making frivolous purchases.

### Garfield the Environmental Mascot

Sometime in the mid-1980s, beachcombers in northwestern France began to notice peculiar debris washing ashore — novelty Garfield phones, sometimes in pristine condition, sometimes in faded pieces. But the phones kept coming for decades, long after the famously lazy cat's popularity waned and landline telephones became superfluous.

In 2018, [FranceInfo](#) reported at least 200 pieces of Garfield were found on French beaches.

Finally, this spring, a farmer named René Morvan [solved the mystery](#). He remembered finding a shipping container in a cave under the sea cliffs after a big storm around the same time the phones began appearing. He led a group of journalists and environmentalists to the cave along a route littered with orange phone cords. Inside the cave, they found a nearly empty shipping container.

The mystery was solved, but the phones continue to wash ashore, each one a reminder that the plastic polluting the ocean results from consumer demand.

### Shipping Losses

Around the same time the Garfield mystery was solved, a stack of [containers fell off a ship](#) hit by a severe storm off the coast of South Carolina. Only a handful were recovered. Now, footwear is washing up on shores from the Orkneys to the Bahamas and the Azores. Those shoes will continue washing up on shore, and worse, breaking down into [microplastics](#) in the water for decades.

Data about merchandise spills are hard to come by. Shipping companies only have to report lost containers if they could become a hazard for other vessels or if they include substances deemed "harmful to the marine environment," such as toxic chemicals.

Companies do not have to report the loss of products like shoes.

The [BBC reports](#) World Shipping Council estimates that just over 1,000 of 218 million containers go overboard annually. The real number may be much higher, yet as a very small share of global shipping, and a small part of the problem of [ocean plastic pollution](#), shipping losses are usually ignored.

Until things start washing up on beaches, where they can't be ignored. Like Garfield phones, an impulse purchase that litters our homes after the initial novelty wears off.

### Plastic Actions

Ultimately, that's good news, because it means that there is room for individuals to make a difference. Beached Garfield phones and Nike trainers are not the biggest problems. But they are highly visible symptoms of the problems of overconsumption and unconscious consumerism. They remind us that plastic pollution is not just a problem "out there" but a direct result of our [purchasing decisions](#).

Consumers can shop more mindfully, avoiding [bottled water](#) and clothing made from plastic-based synthetic fibers. And everyone can encourage companies like [Target](#) to eliminate single-use plastic bags from their stores.

And we can ask when shopping, "What do I need this for?" We can change what is manufactured by asking that simple question.

Feature image: [YouTube](#)

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