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Is Your Plastic Straw Killing Sea Turtles?



By [Gemma Alexander](#)

MAY 22, 2023 [endangered species](#), [plastic pollution](#), [plastic straws](#), [sea turtles](#)



In 2015, a sea turtle with a straw stuck in its nose took over the internet. It launched a movement to eliminate plastic straws and raised awareness of plastic pollution in the ocean. Did any of it make a difference, or was it just another viral moment of shared but shallow outrage? Let's see how the sea turtles are doing now.

Sea Straws

About eight years ago, on a research trip in Costa Rica, marine biologist Christine Figgner from Texas A&M University found an olive ridley sea turtle with a plastic straw lodged in his nostril. The [disturbing video](#) of her team prying the straw out of the turtle's bloody nose went viral. For the first time, the topic of plastic pollution in the oceans became something anyone could respond to emotionally.

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Plastic straws became the focus of attention for many people. Some people gave up using straws. Others searched for [alternatives](#) to plastic, while companies scrambled to develop new [compostable](#) straws. Even diehard disposable plastic straw fans tried to find ways to [recycle](#) them. As a single-use item that (outside of hospitals and certain physical disabilities) wasn't really necessary in the first place, eliminating straws is not a bad starting point.

Plastic Pollution

But ocean plastic is much more than just straws, and there's more at stake than turtles' nostrils. Plastic pollution [affects sea life](#) throughout the ocean. Over 90% of all seabirds have ingested plastic, sometimes in fatal amounts. Each year, consuming or becoming entangled in marine plastic debris kills individuals belonging to [nearly 700](#) different bird, reptile, fish, and mammal marine species. [Microplastics](#) bioaccumulate, even in fish that do not consume plastic litter, and have now been found in human bodies.

It's not clear what impact all the attention to straws has made. In India, England, and the EU, plastic straws have been [banned](#) together with other types of single-use plastic. But Americans still use [millions](#) of plastic straws every day, and straws are among the most common pieces of [litter](#) found in national parks. [Eight million tons](#) of plastic waste continue to travel from inland locations, often along rivers, to enter the oceans every year, collecting in [garbage gyres](#) in oceans around the world.

Sea Turtles

Despite its obvious success in raising awareness of one specific threat to sea turtles, the video doesn't seem to have led to improved conditions for turtles. Of the seven species of sea turtle found all over the world, [six are classified](#) as either threatened or endangered. The seventh, the flatback turtle, is considered [data deficient](#) and may be endangered as well.

About 1,000 sea turtles are known to [die from plastic ingestion](#) each year, and it may be getting worse; more post-hatchling turtles are found with internal plastic than adults. Plastic also threatens turtles through entanglement, both with free-floating debris and as [bycatch](#) in active fishing operations. Loss and degradation of habitat due to [coastal development](#) and water pollution as well as [warming waters](#) resulting from [climate change](#) reduce turtle populations further.



Plastic continues to threaten sea turtles and other wildlife that ingest or get entangled in it.

Sea Change

You might not be thinking about sea turtles when you hop in the car to run an errand. But reducing your carbon footprint by [driving less](#), [shopping smarter](#), and making your [home more efficient](#) is one of the best things you can do to help sea life, including turtles.

To [invest in a post-plastic world](#), move towards a [plastic-free](#) lifestyle, starting with single-use items. Eliminating one type of item at a time is the most practical approach. Straws and [water bottles](#) are low-hanging fruit, then do a [plastics inventory](#) to choose your next goal. Take up [plogging](#), and when you are near the ocean, participate in [coastal cleanups](#).

Save the Turtles

For most of us, choosing [seafood](#) that is certified sustainable has the most immediate impact on the threats to sea turtles. But if you live or travel near the ocean, your actions could harm or help [save sea turtles](#) more directly. If you [boat](#) or [fish](#) on the ocean, learn how to avoid harming turtles with your hobby. Contact your local sea turtle [stranding network](#) if you see a sick or injured sea turtle on or near the beach. Be aware of hatching season (you could even [volunteer](#) to monitor nests) and turn off lights at night to avoid disorienting hatchlings.

Take the ecotourism approach when you travel and visit places like [Tortuguero](#) and [Ostional](#) where turtle conservation also supports local livelihoods. Avoid [souvenirs](#) made from tortoiseshell and do not support restaurants serving [turtle eggs](#) or turtle meat (both of which are [illegal](#) in most places, but still widely available in some countries). Endangered species are not doomed to extinction if there is enough public interest to make the changes to protect them.

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By [Gemma Alexander](#)

Gemma Alexander has an M.S. in urban horticulture and a backyard filled with native plants. After working in a genetics laboratory and at a landfill, she now writes about the environment, the arts and family. See more of her writing [here](#).

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