

# Sea turtles are munching on plastic garbage floating in the ocean

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Norris, a 74-pound loggerhead sea turtle, has its shell cleaned while being treated on Aug. 13, 2015, at the sea turtle hospital at the South Carolina Aquarium in Charleston, South Carolina. Photo: AP Photo/Bruce Smith

It is hard to imagine, but a new study says that half of the sea turtles on the planet have swallowed some form of plastic. The study comes just days after another study showed that about 90 percent of seabirds have also consumed plastic.

The research was led by Qamar Schuyler, who works at the University of Queensland in Australia. Her study estimates that 52 percent of sea turtles worldwide have eaten plastic waste. Some 13 million tons of this garbage is dumped into the oceans every year.

The east coasts of Australia and North America, Southeast Asia, southern Africa and Hawaii seem to be particularly dangerous. Schuyler used a combination of statistics and evidence from animal autopsies, to reach her conclusions.

## **Turtles Mistake Floating Plastic For Food**

First, Schuyler said her team used statistics. They used math, a computer and other people's research to figure out how plastic might be spread out in the ocean. Then they used the computer to figure out how many sea turtles would encounter the plastic.

After that, they did physical experiments. They dissected sea turtles to see how likely it was for turtles to have eaten certain amounts of plastic.

Olive Ridley Turtles eat jellyfish and other floating animals in the open ocean. These types of turtles were shown to be the most at risk for eating plastic. The species is also rare. Olive Ridley Turtles are considered to be "threatened" in most parts of the world. They are already endangered off the coast of Mexico because of people illegally hunting them.

## **"The Problem Will Get Worse"**

According to Schuyler's research, we need to protect these creatures from more than just hunters. We need to protect them from our trash.

"Turtles can be killed directly by ingesting plastics," Schuyler said. The plastic can cut through their intestines or it can block their intestines, which will not let them digest any food.

They can also die because of toxic chemicals that were used to create the plastic. These chemicals can be absorbed in the water and poison the turtles.

Turtles can also starve to death because they feel full after swallowing plastic waste. They feel like they have eaten and may not eat food with the nutrients they need to survive.

Schuyler says plastics are currently being made faster and faster. But she says the technology to throw out the plastic is not growing as quickly. She also worries about invisible micro plastics, which can get into the ocean from the products we use and the clothes we wear.

"Unless we take ... action," she says, the problem will get worse.

## **All Kinds Of Plastic Flowing Into The Oceans**

Schuyler pointed to a recent study on seabirds that showed that less plastic in the water leads to seabirds eating less plastic. She says this gives her hope that we may be able to turn things around.

To make a difference, she said, people should just say no to single-use plastics, like grocery bags and disposable water bottles. She also says people should avoid face scrubs and cleansers that have micro beads in them. The beads help people get their face or body clean, but they also have plastic in them, which can hurt ocean life once it goes down the shower drain.

"We now know that both sea turtles and seabirds are experiencing very high levels of debris ingestion, and that the issue is growing," Chris Wilcox, who helped with the seabird study, said. "It is only a matter of time before we see the same problems in other species, and even in the fish we eat."