

Report reveals pandemic waste spewed into oceans

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A face mask found during a beach cleanup in Hampton Beach © Unsplash / Brian Yurasits

New York, November 10 (RHC)-- A new report claims that 25,000 tons of masks, gloves, and other pandemic-related plastic waste has ended up in our oceans since COVID-19 first emerged. Hospitals, rather than individuals, are the chief culprit.

“The recent COVID-19 pandemic has led to an increased demand for single-use plastic, intensifying pressure on this already out-of-control problem,” a team of Chinese and American researchers wrote in a paper published by the US National Academy of Sciences. “More than eight million tons of pandemic-associated plastic waste have been generated globally, with more than 25,000 tons entering the global

ocean,” they added.

The study is not the first to link the glut of Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) produced during the pandemic to a rise in pollution. The ubiquitous face masks that now litter beaches and high streets can take centuries to decompose, leaching harmful microplastics as they break down. With an estimated 129 billion face masks and 65 billion gloves used globally each month, scientists have already called for the use of more environmentally friendly materials in the production of PPE.

The latest study, however, identifies the source and destinations of most of this waste. Hospitals account for nearly 90% of discarded PPE, with individuals responsible for only 7%. The majority of the waste (79%) enters the global ocean via just 10 rivers.

Overall, Asian rivers are responsible for 73% of waste discharge, followed by European rivers with 11%. Once in the ocean, most of this waste remains close to its source, with East and South Asia, South Africa, and the Caribbean identified as hotspots. At least 13 percent floats in the seawater, 16% sinks to the seabed, and 71% is washed up on the shore.

The researchers warned that as “the pandemic will not be completely controlled in a couple of years,” a further 34,000 tons of discarded PPE will end up in the oceans, with much of it adding to huge “garbage patches” in the North and South Atlantic and Pacific Oceans, as well as the Indian Ocean. The Arctic Ocean has also been identified as a final resting place for some of this trash, and the researchers warned that this area deserves “special concern” due to its already high sensitivity to climate change.

While the toll exacted on the environment by PPE may seem grim, pandemic-related waste is a literal drop in the ocean compared to the overall problem of plastic pollution, accounting for just 1.5% of all plastics entering the oceans from rivers.

<https://www.radiohc.cu/index.php/en/noticias/internacionales/276668-report-reveals-pandemic-waste-spewed-into-oceans>



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