
BBC LEARNING ENGLISH

6 Minute English

The impact of plastic



NB: This is not a word-for-word transcript

Alice

Hello and welcome to 6 Minute English. I'm Alice...

Neil

... and I'm Neil. Hello.

Alice

Hello, Neil. Have you been shopping?

Neil

Yes, I went a bit mad with my credit card actually.

Alice

Gosh, I can see that! But look at all those plastic bags. Why don't you use your own bags?

Neil

You know what, I'm going to. Because they're now charging 5p per bag!

Alice

Don't you follow the news, Neil? It's a recent government **initiative** – which means a new plan for dealing with something – in this case, to cut the number of thin plastic bags being given away in shops. And the environmental impact of plastic is the subject of today's show.

Neil

Is England the first country to charge for these bags, Alice?

Alice

No – other countries in the UK started charging a few years ago. And countries around the world including Bangladesh, South Africa, China, and Italy have actually banned them altogether.

Neil

Interesting. But I don't throw my bags away, Alice. I put them under the kitchen sink.

Alice

Are you a **hoarder**, Neil? That means someone who collects large amounts of stuff and can't throw things away.

Neil

Maybe I am... But seriously, with the 5p charge I'm definitely going to recycle my plastic bags.

Alice

Good. Now let me ask you today's quiz question, Neil: How many tonnes of plastic rubbish from the UK is being sent to China each year for recycling? Is it...

a) 20,000?

b) 200,000?

or c) 2,000,000?

Neil

Well I think it's ... a) 20,000.

Alice

We'll find out if you're right or wrong later on. But first, why are plastic bags bad for the environment?

Neil

Because they're too thin? And when they break all your shopping falls out? That must be it.

Alice

No. They take hundreds of years to **decompose** – or break down by natural chemical processes. And also people don't dispose of them properly. They litter our streets. They **clog** – or block – drains and sewers. They spoil the countryside and damage wildlife.

Neil

Well that's quite a list. So what's the solution then, Alice?

Alice

Well to either recycle or stop using plastic bags. But let's hear about the pharmaceutical company with another idea. This is BBC reporter John Maguire.

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John Maguire, BBC reporter

At this company laboratory in North London they're testing how bags made with a special additive break down when exposed to sunlight, oxygen and heat... The technology was discovered by a British scientist in the 1970s and is now sold to around half the world's countries. In some, biodegradable bags are backed by law.

Neil

And **biodegradable** means able to break down naturally in a way that isn't harmful to the environment.

Alice

So adding small amounts of a chemical to the plastic – a special **additive** – allows the plastic to break down in the open air. But if the technology was discovered back in the 1970s, why aren't these biodegradable bags being used in every country by now?

Neil

I have no idea, Alice. Maybe they aren't as strong as non-biodegradable bags. I like a good strong bag, myself, you see.

Alice

Alright. Well, just go and buy yourself some canvas bags, Neil! In fact, I'll get you some for your birthday.

Neil

Thank you.

Alice

You're very welcome. Now, moving on. Out of around 300 million tons of plastic produced every year, some goes in **landfill** – a place where our rubbish is buried under the earth – but about 10% of plastic ends up in the sea. Let's listen to Biologist Dr Pennie Lindeque from Plymouth Marine Laboratory talking about this.

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Biologist Dr Pennie Lindeque from Plymouth Marine Laboratory

We're already finding that there's a lot of microplastics in the sea and that some of these microplastics are actually being ingested by the zooplankton that live there. We're also concerned this could end up being passed up through the food chain to food which is destined for human consumption so it could end up on your or my plate.

Neil

What are **microplastics**, Alice?

Alice

They're small plastic fragments less than 5mm in size. You find them in cosmetic products such as facial scrubs, shower gel, and toothpaste.

Neil

And I'm guessing that **ingested** means 'eaten'?

Alice

Yes, the **zooplankton** – tiny little animals in the sea – mistake the microplastics for food and eat them. And because the zooplankton and humans are in the same food chain – they're at the bottom and we're at the top – but we're still connected – we may end up eating them and the microplastics inside them!

Neil

That doesn't sound very tasty! Now a **food chain**, by the way, refers to a series of living things where each creature feeds on the one below it in the chain.

Alice

Indeed. OK. Remember my question from earlier? I asked: How many tonnes of plastic rubbish from the UK is being sent to China each year for recycling? Is it...

a) 20,000?

b) 200,000?

or c) 2,000,000?

Neil

And I said a) 20,000.

Alice

Yes but you're wrong, I'm afraid. The answer is b) 200,000 tonnes. And that statistic comes from the University of Cambridge in the UK.

Neil

That's a load of rubbish! Get it – load of rubbish?

Alice

Very good.

Neil

Can we hear today's words again please?

Alice

We certainly can. Here they are:

initiative

hoarder

decompose

clog

biodegradable

additive

landfill

microplastics

ingested

zooplankton

food chain

Neil

Well, that brings us to the end of this 6 Minute English. We hope you enjoyed today's environmentally-friendly programme. Please do join us again soon.

Both

Bye.

Vocabulary

initiative

a new plan for dealing with something

hoarder

someone who collects large amounts of something and finds it hard to throw things away.

decompose

gradually break down by natural chemical processes

clog

block something

biodegradable

able to break down naturally in a way that isn't harmful to the environment

additive

a small amount of a chemical added to something to improve it

landfill

a place where our rubbish is buried under the earth

microplastics

small plastic fragments less than 5mm in size

ingested

eaten

zooplankton

tiny little animals in the sea other sea animals feed on

food chain

a series of living things where each group of creature feeds on the one below it in the chain