

Plastic Inc — how the defining material of the modern age ended up trashing the planet

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Beth Gardiner's angry, well-researched book investigates a profit-driven industry and the environmental debts it imposes on generations



Bales of compressed recyclable plastic at a waste-sorting plant © Getty Images

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Ever since they were discovered, almost by accident, from waste derived from refining fossil fuels, common plastics have all but conquered the planet. Highly adaptable, robust and easy to transport, plastics are found from Mount Everest to the bottom of the Mariana Trench and everywhere in between. They are very profitable — though they have also brought immense costs. Microplastics are in our bodies, in foods, soils, trees and air, wreaking havoc and even lethal harm on nature and wildlife.

In her investigation of the scope and impact of plastics, the environmental journalist Beth Gardiner does not hold back. *Plastic Inc* is an angry book: timely, well researched and full of data that makes your head spin and facts that make you furious.

Just as fossil fuel companies kept quiet about the future impacts of their business on climate, so too they kept research about any harms caused by plastics to themselves. Gardiner also recounts industry debates in the 1960s over how to wean the postwar generation off reuse and frugality and “teach customers how to waste”.

Gardiner says that as she “began to reframe the plastic story through a lens of corporate and political responsibility”, she kept returning to one question: “How could they do this?”



Her journalistic journey starts around 50 years ago. Reacting to books like *Silent Spring*, Rachel Carson’s groundbreaking account of the devastating impact of pesticides on nature, the early environment movements of the 1970s attempted to campaign against all kinds of waste — plastics primarily among them. Industry countered by promoting the concept of recycling. If the responsibility of dealing with rubbish appropriately could be shifted to the consumer, then industry was largely off the hook.

To my surprise — and shock — I learnt that the Keep America Beautiful campaign was not founded by the government or a civic-minded institution but by manufacturers. Elsewhere, Gardiner writes, industry ploughed money into anti-litter groups in Britain, Australia and France. Yes, they might well claim that they were acting as responsible corporate citizens, but I agree with Gardiner that the overriding motives were profit-based.

One groundbreaking television campaign from the early 1970s centred on a Native American suffering the careless despoilment of nature — “People start pollution: People can stop it”, ran the catchline. The ad, which was sponsored by some of America’s biggest manufacturers, including Coca-Cola, Pepsi, Philip Morris Tobacco and the American Can Company, achieved record viewer-recognition levels and played an important part in turning a systemic problem into a personal one.

Despite so many attempts to make a difference, one to five trillion plastic bags are manufactured each year

“The goal was clear,” writes Gardiner, citing Heather Rogers, author of *Gone Tomorrow, the Hidden Life of Garbage* (2005), that if Americans could be persuaded to accept the concept of personal responsibility, it would mean “laws will not be enacted, government won’t intervene and production can continue on industry’s terms.”

It became — and it remains — our fault if there is litter in the street. We get fined for littering, and there are still endless legal disputes as to who is responsible for the mountains of fly-tipped rubbish left on country lanes and in fields.

Plastic’s versatility has made it the foundational material of our modern economy, with single-use towering over what can — genuinely — be recycled. The fast-fashion giant Shein produces more than one million different designs a year, manufactured from fossil-fuel-derived polyester, destined for one or two wears before the bin. More than 500bn plastic water bottles are used each year; one billion plastic bath ducks are shipped across seas to bathtubs elsewhere. And, despite so many attempts to make a difference, one to five trillion plastic bags are manufactured every year, with their average use being calculated at between 12 and 15 minutes.

Production rose in tandem with a culture that believed plastic objects were of little value. It was the perfect match for an ethos of disposability and newness. Introducing new styles — in clothes, sunglasses, earrings — meant that consumers kept on buying and discarding.

Today polyethylene is the world’s most common form of plastic, consuming a significant and growing amount of all fossil fuels. As renewable energy soars, oil companies are increasingly looking to plastic to support continued production rises.

There are other options — alternatives derived from natural materials such as hemp or seaweed, for example — that might be developed. Gardiner largely does not explore these, explaining that her book is laying out the problems and that she leaves it to others to find the solutions.

Legislation is helping. France has banned school uniforms containing the chemical PFAS, found in polyester. The EU wants to ban PFAS from all fabrics. The UK has introduced a [law](#) extending the responsibility of producers for the disposal of packaging.

It’s a good start, but not nearly enough. No one disputes that plastic, in itself, is an extraordinary material. What else could provide cannulas and drips and coatings for electrical wires and masks to supply oxygen to a car crash victim? But as science delves into the physical impacts microplastics are having on our bodies, not to mention the natural world, the time for a global rethink is well overdue.

Plastic Inc.: Big Oil, Big Money and the Plan to Trash Our Future by Beth Gardiner
Monoray £22/Avery \$32, 352 pages

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