

A Better Path for Plastic

Plastic plays an essential role in modern life, serving as a building block for everything from packaging to medical equipment. This versatile material has undeniable upsides—but far too much of it ends up in landfills or in our environment. What can each of us do to be part of the solution? Here's some inspiration for how you can make a positive impact in your community and the world.

"We believe that people have the capacity to influence leaders, big brands, policymakers—not just with their purchasing power, but as a force for change in the entire plastics ecosystem."



Lilly Sedaghat
National Geographic Explorer



Solutions in Action

Initiatives that encourage repair, reuse, and recycling to reduce plastic waste come from every part of society and from every corner of the world. In India, some shops have begun treating recyclables as a form of currency redeemable for groceries. In the U.S., Phoenix—once branded the world's least sustainable city—now has set an ambitious goal to be zero

waste by 2050, and other cities are setting their own zero-waste targets. Plastic waste is a complex problem that will require markets, infrastructure, and leadership to solve. "We shouldn't be afraid of complicated problems," said Keefe Harrison, founder and CEO of The Recycling Partnership. "We just need systems solutions that address the complexity."



QUESTION

Compared with new PET* plastic, how much energy does recycled PET save?

- A) 33% C) 79%
B) 50% D) 91%

*polyethylene terephthalate

ANSWER: C. Recycled polyethylene terephthalate (PET) plastic uses 79 percent less energy than new, or virgin, plastic. Recycled high-density polyethylene (HDPE) and polypropylene (PP) each use 88 percent less energy.

A Virtual Ideas Exchange

Fourteen experts from around the world gathered virtually in March 2021 to discuss the end-of-life challenges for plastics and some successful examples of positive change. The participants came from local governments,

environmental groups, businesses, and universities. Across three dynamic breakout sessions, they outlined what must happen now to stop plastic waste—and described heartening examples of change already under way.

Milliken

For Milliken, a global manufacturer that convened the event in March, finding solutions for end-of-life plastics is a sustainability goal for the company. "We are a technology player in the ecosystem of plastics," said CEO Halsey Cook. "We have a responsibility to think intentionally about where our products go and how they are managed in the future."

What You Can Do

Be a Community Leader

Solving big challenges requires leadership from our elected officials, from businesses, and from each one of us. As parents or mentors, we can teach and encourage positive behaviors in others. In our work lives, we can drive change within our own companies. As voters, we can challenge our legislators to adopt policies that require more sustainable systems. And as everyday citizens, we can share what matters to us in conversations and on social media.



Stay Curious

Waste is a problem that is growing right before our eyes. Making decisions about what types of products to buy—or whether to purchase them at all—can feel overwhelming. Start by asking questions about the products that you're using. What is it made of? How long will it last? Is it recyclable or compostable in your area? Is there an alternative? Then look for products that contain recycled materials and are designed from the start with circularity in mind.



Change Your Perspective

Placing recyclable and compostable items in their appropriate bins whenever you can is very important—but that's not all you can do. Consider ways to buy less and reuse more, such as choosing refillable packaging. See if your community offers repair workshops as a way to keep items working longer. Neighborhood groups and thrift stores are a great way to pass on what you no longer need and pick up necessities without buying new things.

