

Summary

AFS Policy Statement #20:
Marine Plastic Debris
(Abbreviated)

The use and disposal of synthetic materials, especially plastics, has greatly increased over past decades. Plastics degrade at such a slow rate that they may remain in the environment for years or decades. There is increasing evidence that such synthetic debris is more detrimental to aquatic life than previously believed.

Animals can become entangled in discarded plastic lines or net fragments and may be injured by chafing, impairing their ability to escape predators or pursue food, or drowned. The problem is of such magnitude as to be a contributing factor in the decline of many populations of fish, marine mammals, and turtles. Scientists regularly report "scars" and bruises on marine mammals as evidence of entanglement. It is difficult, if not impossible, to know if the scar is from active or discarded fishing gear. There are no reliable estimates of the fate of marine animals that entangle in debris while at sea or ingest plastic products, because these animals either sink, are eaten, or go unnoticed by human observers due to the vastness of the ocean.

The commercial fishing industry has played a leadership role in addressing ways to reduce plastic debris accidentally or deliberately discarded into the marine environment. Fishing captains are taking a hard look at how ships are provisioned, are seeking ways to reduce the amount of garbage generated by food packaging and supplies, and are installing trash compactors.

The plastics industry has initiated research to further develop photodegradable and biodegradable plastics for specific applications. Recycling and scrap industries are interested in the collection of plastic materials because of new domestic and overseas markets.

The AFS policy regarding marine plastic debris is to:

1. Actively support and participate in the development of public information and education materials to provide for increased public awareness of the impacts of marine debris on aquatic species, and facilitate the effective transfer to users of new and innovative information and techniques regarding plastic recycling, packaging, alternative materials, and ways to effect change in individual disposal habits.
2. Support and encourage rigorous enforcement of federal, state, provincial, and local laws, regulations, and standards pertaining to marine debris.
3. Support and encourage programs to identify, inventory, and document sensitive habitats and species impacted by plastic debris, and utilize this information to devise corrective actions.
4. Encourage studies designed to determine and apply the most effective means of increasing the recycling of plastic and other synthetic materials.
5. Emphasize the need for further research on biodegradability and development of new, more environmentally sound packaging technology.
6. Lobby for sensible legislation that aims to control the disposal and recycling of non-degradable debris.
7. Encourage publication of information (scientific articles, photos, etc.) to

Summary

document the impacts of marine plastic debris.

8. Promote, sponsor, and participate in beach and marine cleanup efforts.