

UN WATER

Discharging sewage into the ocean

Topic Background

Sewage being discharged into the ocean is one of the great environmentalist crises our world is going through today. As defined by The International Convention for the Prevention of Pollution from Ships, sewage is “the drainage and other waste from any form of toilets and urinals, drainage from medical premises, spaces containing live animals and other wastewaters missed with these drainages.”¹ Its discharge into the sea can create a health hazard. It can also lead to oxygen depletion and can be an obvious visual pollution in coastal areas - a major problem for countries with tourist industries. The main sources of human-produced sewage are land-based - such as municipal sewers or treatment plants. However, the discharge of sewage into the sea from ships also contributes to marine pollution.²

The majority of sewage pollution comes via Water companies. For years, they have been dumping sewage into rivers and seas via sewage pipes known as “storm overflows” that are only intended for use following extreme weather to prevent sewage backing up into homes and businesses. However, data collected by citizen scientists, journalists and campaign groups shows that sewage is regularly dumped during normal weather conditions.³ Many discharges have also happened illegally and water companies have been fined large sums of money for this in the past, for example, in 2021, Southern Water was fined £90 million for widespread pollution

¹ Why International Sewage Regulations Are [Not Good]. (2020, 29 mayo). Ocean Conservancy.

² Prevention of Pollution by Sewage from Ships. (s. f.).

³ Wilson, S. (2022, August 25th). Here's why sewage is being dumped into seas and rivers – and what you can do about it. The Big Issue.

after pleading guilty to more than 6,000 unpermitted sewage discharges. The discharges were carried out between 2010 and 2015.⁴

Recently, this problem has been very prominent in European countries, especially in the United Kingdom, as the UK Environment Agency stated that raw sewage was pumped into rivers and seas about 375,000 times in 2021.⁵ Three French members of the European Parliament say they have written to the European Commission, asking it to take action to stop the UK from polluting the Channel and North Sea. Since Brexit, they said, the UK "has chosen to lower its water quality standards".⁶

Another major source of sewage comes from ships in the middle of the ocean, since the current international sewage regulation allows ships to dump untreated sewage into the ocean as long as they are further than 12 nautical miles from the coast,⁷ leaving the vast majority of the ocean to be polluted without any control. Not only this, as a 2017 study concluded that 97 percent of ships tested didn't come remotely close to meet the legal standards.⁸

With each day that goes by, more and more waste finds its way into the ocean, disrupting the biggest natural ecosystem on Earth, affecting the lives of thousands and thousands of different animal and vegetal species. This will continue to happen unless a stance is taken on the matter by the countries of our world. The ocean is a fundamental part of our planet, and it's time to treat it as such.

⁴ Weir, L. (2022, September 2nd). Why, Exactly, Are We Pumping Raw Sewage Into Our Seas And Rivers? British Vogue.

⁵ BBC News. (2022, August 26th). Why is raw sewage pumped into the sea?

⁶ *ibid*

⁷ Why International Sewage Regulations Are [Not Good]. (2020, 29 mayo). Ocean Conservancy.

⁸ *ibid*

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