<p> Inevitably, much of the plastic waste we produce ends up in our oceans. This is having disastrous effects. </p>

< h2> Microplastics </h2>

<p> Microplastics are defined as plastic particles that are less than 5 millimetres long. Due to their tiny size, it is not only hard to see them but hard to catch them as they are washed into our oceans.</p>

<p> They can come from primary sources like cosmetics or clothes, or secondary sources whereby bigger bits of plastic are eventually broken down into smaller pieces. </p>

<p> Once in the ocean, microplastics are consumed by zooplankton. These microscopic organisms are the basis of all marine food chains. As they accidentally feed on microplastic, it builds up in their bodies. They are then eaten by a bigger animal, like a fish, and the bioaccumulation of plastic begins to affect all animals in the food chain. Even top predators like seabirds, seals, sharks, whales and even humans are accidentally consuming microplastic in the food they eat. </p>

<p> Aside from physically accumulating within the bodies of the living organisms unfortunate enough to ingest them, microplastics can also carry harmful toxins which are then released into the water. These combined effects are having serious consequences for the health and functioning of our oceans. </p>

<h2> Larger plastics </h2>

<p> Larger plastic items, for example single-use bottles, cups and straws (to name but a few), are damaging in perhaps more obvious ways. They can be eaten by sea animals or cause them to become trapped, which can lead to injury and death. For example, sea turtles like to eat jellyfish, but they cannot distinguish between a jellyfish and a plastic bag floating underwater and often accidentally eat the latter. Imagine what would happen to a human if they ate a plastic bag. </p>

<h2> Why is this a problem? </h2>

<p> The functioning of our oceans is dependent upon a delicate balance of interactions between both the physical environment and the organisms living within it. When a species becomes unhealthy, it cannot perform its unique role properly. This then affects all of the other species that it interacts with, making it more difficult for them to perform their roles. The system as a whole therefore begins to function less effectively.</p>

<p> The bioaccumulation of plastic is affecting biodiversity, which in turn will affect the services we derive from our oceans. A notable example of this is food production. </p>

<p> Plastic pollution is bad enough, but when combined with other factors like overfishing, pollution and climate change, it is undeniable that the health of our oceans are severely compromised. We will not be able to continue using them in the same way if we do not look after them. We all need to do our bit to reduce the amount of plastic that we use and to ensure that it is disposed of correctly afterwards. </p>