# Killer plastics

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On Tuesday, fisherfolks in Bolinao, Pangasinan, discovered a short-finned pilot whale (Globicephala macrorhynchus) in emaciated condition, weak, and struggling to swim. It died not long after. A necropsy revealed that the dolphin’s stomach was filled with debris.

Hasmin Chogsayan, a veterinarian from the Bureau of Fisheries and Aquatic Resources, described the plastic waste inside the dolphin’s stomach as “blackened,” indicating that it had been there for a long time. She said the mammal was likely starving and unable to absorb nutrients.

“It’s heartbreaking. Our oceans have become dumping grounds for human waste, and marine life is paying the price,” she said.

A similar incident happened in 2019 when another emaciated-looking whale was discovered vomiting blood and listing badly as it swam in the Davao Gulf. A report by the National Geographic said Darrell Blatchley, the marine mammal expert who recovered the dead whale’s body, found almost 40 kilos of plastic waste that was “hard and compacted as a baseball” inside the animal’s stomach.

Blatchley, who by then had recovered 61 whales that died in the area, estimated that 74 percent or 45 of them died due to plastic waste. “It’s just tragic that this is becoming the norm, to expect that these whales will die because of plastic rather than from natural causes,” he said.

## Positive for microplastics

The two incidents happened six years apart and the problem remains the same: the mounting problem of plastic waste. It is clogging our sewers, seas, and farmlands. Not only is plastic waste killing marine life, it has also made its way into the food chain and into the human body as microplastics.

In 2019, the Philippines accounted for 36.38 percent of global oceanic plastic waste. Per the World Bank, the country consumes 163 million sachets a day and generates 2.3 million tons of plastic waste a year.

“Unfortunately, only 28 percent of key plastic resins are being recycled while the rest are simply discarded. So, where does the remaining 72 percent of these plastics go? To find it, one no longer needs to go to the nearest scrap shop but they can simply open their refrigerators,” the National Research Council of the Philippines (NRCP) said.

A team led by Dr. Deo Florence L. Onda from the University of the Philippines Marine Science Institute (MSI) found that mussels in eight wet markets including Marikina, Navotas, Bacoor, and Antique were positive for microplastics. Most of the plastics they found were thin plastic wraps, labels, packaging, foamed fragments, and straws. Another study funded by the NRCP also found microplastics in milkfish or bangus and mud clam samples from Butuan.

## More drastic action

These studies and the deaths of those marine mammals should have been a wake-up call for the government to take a more drastic action on its unabated garbage problem.

“The plastic waste issue in the Philippines results from a complex mix of inadequate waste management, consumer behavior and economic and policy challenges,” an article on the Climate Impacts Tracker Asia in October last year stated. It noted that less than half of the country’s plastic waste enters sanitary landfills while the rest end up in open dumpsites, rivers, and the ocean.

To be sure, the problem is not lack of laws.

For one, Republic Act No. 9003 or the Ecological Solid Waste Management Act of 2000 provides the necessary policy framework that mandates local government units (LGUs) to establish an integrated solid waste management plan based on the 3Rs: reduce, reuse, and recycle. Section 10 of the law states that the municipality or city should collect nonrecyclable materials and special waste, while the barangay should segregate and collect solid waste.

## Plastic production

However, implementation at the local level has been dismal with majority of LGUs failing at collection and proper disposal, as well as providing necessary infrastructure. In 2021, then Environment Secretary Roy Cimatu called out LGUs for failing at their job and threatened them with sanctions. But has any LGU or official faced penalties for improper waste disposal?

Indeed, the country’s plastic waste problem is complex and cannot just be blamed on a specific sector or a singular cause. It requires collective action from the government, businesses, and individuals. It is a consequence of plastic production—largely unregulated, poor implementation of environment laws, and the public’s lack of understanding on the extent of the problem and how it affects their health.

“For many Filipinos, microplastics, plastics, when you go to the communities, the problem is very abstract to them,” said MSI’s Onda. He said it was important to tell stories on the impact of plastic waste that people could relate to.

Aside from being harmful to humans, the recent incidents dramatized how our failure to implement a responsible garbage disposal system also takes a toll on our marine species. How many more marine mammals need to die before this tragedy sinks in?