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IMAS
INSTITUTE FOR MARINE & ANTARCTIC STUDIES

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Marine plastic pollution posing a challenge for global ocean governance

Plastic pollution of the world's oceans is posing a growing challenge not only for wildlife, scientists and environmentalists but also for nations and international bodies such as the United Nations.

In an article [published in the international journal Nature Communications](#), IMAS Professor Marcus Haward said a unique governance challenge is being posed by the multi-faceted nature of the plastic problem and calls for an international agreement to address it.

"Marine plastic pollution is the result of both land and sea-based pollution, and the effects of plastic pollution transcend national borders," Professor Haward said.

"As a result, finding global solutions may need to move away from traditional state-based, sector-focused responses to ocean issues.

"Effective responses will need to involve and link both state and non-state actors as well as business and civil society."

Professor Haward said international agreements are not easily developed and are often criticised for the time taken to reach agreements and the tendency for a minimal tolerable consensus to shape outcomes.

"But there are precedents that give hope that international ocean governance can adapt to address the current challenge.

"For example, 50 years ago concerns about uncontrolled exploitation of the ocean led to the Third United Nations Conference on the Law of the Sea and the development of the United Nations Law of the Sea Convention.

"An international agreement to address marine plastics could be pursued in a similar manner, but would necessitate a more integrated and broad-based approach of the type followed when the Montreal Protocol addressed chlorofluorocarbons that were depleting the ozone layer.

"The United Nations Environment Assembly meeting in Kenya last December, under the auspices of the UN Environment Program, was the most recent gathering to address the problem.

"A key starting point for further action would be to build on commitments made in Nairobi, reaffirming the principles contained in the Rio Declaration on Environment and Development in 1992 as well as commitments made in 2015 by world leaders in adopting the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

“Ongoing scientific research is needed to help define the scale and scope of the problem, while linking business and industry to such issues could be facilitated by the work of the World Ocean Council as a global industry alliance committed to Corporate Ocean Responsibility.

“Community action can also play a key role by reducing the amount of plastic entering the marine environment, focusing on recycling and reusing plastics, continuing to improve public awareness of the impacts and vectors of marine plastic pollution, and supporting practical mechanisms such as litter traps.

“Solving the problem of plastic pollution may not be a simple or quick process, but there is reason to be optimistic that international governance frameworks can adapt to address an issue that affects every corner of the world’s oceans,” Professor Haward said.

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