

## CLEAN-UPS OR CLEAN-WASHING?

### Environmental organisations claim Plastic clean-up tech not all it seems on the surface

**London/Zurich: A new report from the Environmental Investigation Agency (EIA) and OceanCare highlights the damaging impacts of ‘quick fix’ ocean clean-up technologies. The most well-known example is *The Ocean Cleanup* project (TOC), which has been found to have damaging environmental impacts on marine life.**

In *Clean-ups or clean-washing?* EIA and OceanCare are calling for international government delegates at the third round of UN negotiations on a Global Plastics Treaty in Nairobi, Kenya between 13-17 November, to prioritise reducing production of plastics, rather than focusing on clean-up technologies which can be costly, damaging to the environment and distract from real solutions.

As part of this Treaty, negotiators will be looking at remedial measures to support national action to end plastic pollution, particularly to address the disproportionate impact placed on the Least Developed Countries (LDCs) and Small Island Developing States (SIDS). Environmental organisations are calling for Governments to focus on upstream solutions that reduce plastic production rather than relying on quick fixes that can have broader negative impacts.

One of these is the growing popularity of marine plastic clean-up devices or technologies that aim to collect and remove plastic pollution from the ocean. Research has identified 38 technologies (at different stages of use) that seek to tackle the plastic crisis through measures including drone and robots, sand filters and surface skimmers and vacuums.<sup>i</sup>

Jacob Kean-Hammerson, Ocean Campaigner at Environmental Investigation Agency says: “It’s time to get real about clean-up tech. Our concerns lie in the role clean-ups play in distracting from more decisive solutions, such as reductions in production and consumption”.

While on the surface the purpose of these technologies sounds appealing, environmental organisations, as well as academics are concerned that they pose a threat to the very same species and ecosystems that they are seeking to help. They also warn such technologies distract from policy measures that actually address plastic pollution, such as tackling production and consumption.

“We recognise that clean-up measures are an inevitable and necessary part of a full lifecycle approach to ending the plastic pollution crisis”, says Kean-Hammerson, “however, governments and negotiators must seize the opportunity of the upcoming Global Plastics Treaty to put the necessary measures in place to ensure we are not endlessly cleaning-up plastics and when we are, we’re putting people and the planet first”.

One major concern is that plastic and marine life often accumulate in the same areas. In the Great Pacific Garbage Patch, for instance, currents concentrate plastics and marine life in the same small areas.<sup>ii</sup> In Hawaii, 100 per cent of larval fish and 95 per cent of floating plastics are concentrated into only 8 per cent of the ocean surface.<sup>iii</sup>

Furthermore, clean-up technologies have been recognised as a climate intensive process because of the fuel they burn. Studies have found that 200 vessel-based clean-up devices would not clean the

world's oceans in more than 100 years of continuous operation, but there would be significant climate implications.<sup>iv</sup>

"These cleanup projects appear attractive to the wider public, and also to decision-makers" says Ewoud Lauwerier, Plastics Policy Expert at OceanCare, "Wouldn't it be great to have such an easy solution, where 'ocean vacuum cleaners' enable business as usual? As attractive as it sounds, it is misleading. They are ineffective, capital intensive, falsely seen to be a solution and can even harm marine wildlife."

The most well-known clean-up initiative is *The Ocean Cleanup* (TOC), established when the founder conceived of a machine to clean the Great Pacific Garbage Patch. It anticipated collecting between 9,900-14,900kg of waste per week but researchers have estimated the reality is between 3.7-5.5 times lower than expected.<sup>v</sup>

Environmental organisations and scientists have also raised concern about TOC's impact on marine life. Reported bycatch from TOC's 2020 high-seas clean-ups include: Sea turtles (including endangered species), sharks, diverse fish species and cephalopods.<sup>vi</sup>

There has also been speculation about its links to the plastics industry due to its funders, who have previously included Saudi petrochemical and polymer producer SABIC, Dutch industrial conglomerate and plastics manufacturer DSM and Coca-Cola which was named as the UK's worst plastic polluter for the fourth year running earlier this year.

"Cleanup projects are a wonderful tool for the industry to distracting from the real problem. No surprise there, when you look at who the core funders are", adds Lauwerier.

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## EDITORS' NOTES

1. The Environmental Investigation Agency (EIA) investigates and campaigns against environmental crime and abuses. Our undercover investigations expose transnational wildlife crime, with a focus on elephants, pangolins and tigers, and forest crimes such as illegal logging and deforestation for cash crops such as palm oil; we work to safeguard global marine ecosystems by tackling plastic pollution, exposing illegal fishing and seeking an end to all whaling; and we address the threat of global warming by campaigning to curtail powerful refrigerant greenhouse gases and exposing related criminal trade.

2. Read and download *The Italian Job: How Myanmar timber is trafficked through Italy to the rest of Europe despite EU laws* at <https://eia-international.org/wp-content/uploads/EIA-The-Italian-Job-2021-FINAL.pdf>

3. Since 1989, the international research, policy and marine conservation organisation OceanCare has worked for the protection of marine species and the oceans. The organisation holds Special Consultative Status with UN ECOSOC, is accredited to UNEP/UNEA, is partner of a number of regional agreements and Multilateral Environmental Agreements (MEAs). OceanCare has also been accredited as part of the Major Group 'Science & Technology' to the United Nations Environment Assembly (UNEA), which is the governing body of UNEP and is a part of the UNEP Global Partnership on Marine Litter. . [www.oceancare.org](http://www.oceancare.org)

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<sup>i</sup> Schmaltz, E., *et al* (2020). Plastic pollution solutions: emerging technologies to prevent and collect marine plastic pollution. *Environment International*, 144, 106067. [Available here.](#)

<sup>ii</sup> Chong, F., *et al* (2023). High concentrations of floating neustonic life in the plastic-rich North Pacific Garbage Patch. *PLoS Biology*, 21(5). [Available here.](#)

<sup>iii</sup> Whitney, J. L., *et al* (2021). Surface slicks are pelagic nurseries for diverse ocean fauna. *Scientific Reports 2021 11:1*, 11(1), 1–18. [Available here.](#)

<sup>iv</sup> Hohn, S. *et al* (2020). The long-term legacy of plastic mass production. *Science of The Total Environment*, 746, 141115. [Available here.](#)

<sup>v</sup> TOC (20 October 2021), Successful System 002 Trial Validates Our Technology and Launches Ongoing Great Pacific Garbage Patch Cleanup Operations [Available here.](#)

<sup>vi</sup> TOC (2023) System 002 and marine life: Prevention and mitigation, The Ocean Cleanup. [Available here.](#)