



17.8.2015 – An estimated 5 trillion pieces of plastic currently float in the world's oceans, up from none in 1950. The presence of plastic materials in the world's oceans poses a serious question about its potential impact on the food supply chain that stretches from plankton - which have been filmed eating plastic pellets – to shellfish, salmon, tuna and whales, not to mention humans.

With these troubling facts in mind, the UN Food and Agriculture Organization ([FAO](#)) is [supporting](#)

the efforts of the Norwegian vessel,

[*Dr Fridtjof Nansen*](#)

, which aims to chart the impact of plastic waste, including rubbish such as plastic bags, and 'microplastics', used in products such as cosmetics and shower gels, in the Indian Ocean. The research vessel, operated by the Norwegian Institute of Marine Research (

[IMR](#)

) in collaboration with FAO, has since 1975 plied the world's oceans to collect information about marine resources and the health of marine ecosystems.

Some 18 scientists from eight countries are currently aboard the vessel, measuring ocean

temperatures, oxygen levels, chlorophyll and biological processes, such as plankton production and fish distribution. However, this year there are two additional goals: to assess the scale and nature of industrial rubbish in remote parts of the southern Indian Ocean, and to study how the local Gyre, a cyclical vortex of currents, operates to spread plankton and tiny fish. “We have found some plastic particles in almost all the stations we sampled,” said Reidar Toresen of IMR, cruise leader of the first leg.



Plastic rubbish in the ocean can be ingested by wildlife – some sea creatures have even been seen to prefer plastic beads of a particular colour – causing severe harm. Even tiny plankton have been observed consuming plastic beads. Sea turtles that eat plastic bags, for example, often die of dehydration and sunburn, as their digestive system becomes paralysed, causing decomposed food to turn into gas, which forces the animals to float.

According to FAO, huge floating islands of rubbish, twice the size of Texas, have recently been located in both the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans, whereas the southern Indian Ocean is relatively unexplored. The Trans-Indian Ocean Survey will provide scientists with critical information concerning the extent and impact of so-called plastic beads in the ocean.

□

UNRIC's related links:

Finnish United Nations Association campaign against plastic in the oceans: <https://www.pallokutistajat.fi/en/>