

Why manufacturers need to take ownership of the plastic problem

A recent study by Plymouth University reported that plastic was found in a third of UK-caught fish, while a second report, by scientists at Ghent University in Belgium, calculated that people who eat seafood ingest up to 11,000 tiny pieces of plastic every year.

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In this article we explain why manufacturers, particularly in the food sector, must take control of getting the plastic epidemic under control by stopping it at the source.

The damage that plastic is doing to our environment is receiving widespread coverage, notably in recent episodes of David Attenborough's BBC documentary, *The Blue Planet II*, showing the harm – and distress – plastic is causing marine life.

The increased coverage appears to be affecting the public's opinion and, as a result, their shopping habits. For example, a Populus poll in 2017 concluded that four out of five people were concerned about the amount of plastic packaging thrown away in the UK. However, in order to actually make a difference to the state of our oceans and marine life, food manufacturers must take a stand and move away from using plastic packaging altogether.

Radical approach

Andy Clarke, former CEO of ASDA, one of Britain's biggest supermarket chains recently said, "regardless of how much is invested in Britain's recycling infrastructure, virtually all plastic packaging will reach landfill or the bottom of the ocean sooner or later. Once there, it will remain on the earth for centuries."

The only way to stop this is to take plastic off the shelves in the first place.

While many supermarkets are investing billions into increasing the amount of recycled plastic they use, it often leads to

unusable or inconvenient options that results in the supermarket often reverting back to the original packaging choice.

Clarke and many campaigners, like those behind A Plastic Planet, are campaigning for supermarkets to create plastic-free aisles to cater for customer demand. There are also some independent stores breaking through where customers bring in their own containers to refill with products like shampoo, pasta or even cheese.

However, the awareness and shift towards reducing plastic use is not just a UK issue.

Worldwide shift

In September, Sri Lanka announced a ban on single use plastic and Kenya implemented what is said to be the world's toughest plastic bag ban earlier in the year. The Environment Management Agency in Zimbabwe has also ordered the food industry to stop using containers made from expanded polystyrene (EPS) immediately.

Additionally, a recent UN resolution, backed by more than 200 countries, provides a framework for a collective action to prevent and reduce marine pollution. This particularly refers to pollution from land-based activities, as well as urging a global response into taking account for the full life cycle of products and packaging.

However, many experts note that without binding commitments, consumers and particularly manufacturers must take steps to begin tackling the problem.

Alternative options

As a result, some manufacturers are looking to alternative materials for packaging. From plant-based bio-plastics to glass or aluminium, there are plenty of substitutes available with various benefits.

Materials like glass and aluminium are indefinitely recyclable. In fact, recycling aluminium takes 95% less energy than producing it from its raw materials. Aluminium also offers storage and cooking benefits in comparison to plastic, including being heat resistant to over 400 degrees and not being affected by extreme freezing.

Foil trays, like those manufactured by Advanta, which are used across the ready-to-cook meal, meat and poultry and takeaway food sectors can also be gas flushed or vacuum packed, dramatically extending the product shelf life in comparison to plastic.

"We want a future for our grandchildren which is as far as possible plastic free," Andy Clarke continued.

"Despite more than a decade of concerted supermarket action on this issue, globally we are still dumping in excess of eight million tonnes of plastic in the ocean each year."

It is hoped that with shows like *The Blue Planet II* shining a light on the issue, consumers will begin to demand more from their food manufacturers to change the way they package their food.

However, it is not consumers who should take ownership of this. Ownership of taking plastic out of the equation sits firmly with manufacturers. ■

