

Oceans are turning into earth's last sink

Health/Science

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Photo: Plastic waste at Juhu beach in Mumbai, India. AFP PIC

By [Abdul Rahim Mydin](#) for New Straits Times **July 11, 2018 @ 8:52am** LAST month, the National Geographic posed question: Planet or Plastic? The answer, I thought, was obvious. Not so, it turns out. The magazine, which is famed for its great photographs (and articles, too), has a heart-wrenching picture of a seahorse clutching onto a plastic cotton swab floating in the polluted waters off the Indonesian island of Sumbawa. Those who know something about their seas and seahorses know that these creatures latch to natural debris to ride the swift currents of the ocean depths, but a cotton swab is as far removed from seagrass as you can get. There are other disturbing pictures, too. Please do not gloat that the cotton swab was not in the waters of our Straits of Malacca or the South China Sea. Alas Strait or the Sape Strait it may have been, but let us not lose sight of the fact that plastic waste is everywhere, strangling sea creatures big and small. If marine creatures die, we die, ocean eventually. Yes, the Earth, the only habitable planet we have, is being strangled by plastic. All made by men for men. Most of it land up in the ocean. It has been so since the late 18th century when plastics first rolled out of the the factory that the industrial revolution made. And estimates vary, and understandably so. Such things are hard to measure but guesstimates by researchers put the annual waste entering the ocean between three million and 13 million tonnes. And as the *National Geographic* puts it, our poor ocean is turning into Earth's last sink. Just visit the world's beaches and you will see things plastic with letters in all languages: Hindi, Tamil, Chinese, Tagalog, English, German, Korean and Telugu. If you are multilingual, you will see labels from other lands, too. Littering has gone global. Like the space race, the Europeans and Asians are competing to make the seas a dumping ground for their national trash. According to one calculation, Asia and Europe produce equal amounts of plastics, most of which end up in the sea. But blaming plastics for all the oceans' ills is pointless. It is like blaming fire for the mischief of the arsonist. Plastic, when it first made its appearance, saved lives in the wild, especially those of the elephants and rhinos. The piano keys that played James Taylor's *Fire and Rain* were in all likelihood made of ivory recovered from butchered elephants and rhinos. Plastics saved them. Now, you can play Elton John's *Goodbye Norma Jean* hitting your plastic piano keys comforted by the knowledge that you are not complicit in the deaths of elephants and rhinos. This will be music to many ears. But marine wildlife may not be so saved. According to WWF 2018 Report, *Out of the Plastic Trap*, the Mediterranean Sea is today, one of the seas with the highest levels of plastic pollution in the world. The reports says: 'Plastics account for 95 per cent of the waste in the open sea, on the seabed and on beaches across the Mediterranean. This waste comes mainly from Turkey and Spain, followed by Italy, Egypt and France.' In the damning report, Europe is given the dubious distinction of being the 'second largest plastics producer in the world, after China, dumping 150,000-500,000 tonnes of macroplastics and 70,000-130,000 tonnes of micro-plastics in the sea every year.' And

most of the plastics find their way into the Mediterranean Sea threatening marine life. Picture this, with a little help from WWF: 500,000 tonnes of macroplastics equals 66,000 trash trucks. Imagine these lorries dumping the tonnage of waste in the sea every year. And that is only the Mediterranean Sea. [⋯] [https://www.nst.com.my/opinion/columni ... -turning-earths-last-sink](https://www.nst.com.my/opinion/columni...-turning-earths-last-sink)