

Plastics: The History of an Ecological Crisis



The [Earth Day Network](#) has announced that this year's Earth Day, on Sunday, April 22, will focus on ending [plastic](#) pollution by Earth Day 2020, the 50th anniversary of the world's [first Earth Day in 1970](#), which led to the creation of the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) and the passage of the Clean Water, Clean Air and Endangered Species Acts.

Now, the Earth Day Network seeks to remain true to its legacy by initiating another major clean-up job. As the Earth Day Network points out in its [petition](#) to end plastic pollution, 300 million tons of plastic are sold each year, and 90 percent of that is thrown away, ending up in landfills, in [the oceans](#) and in [our bodies](#).

In honor of this worthy goal, EcoWatch has put together a brief history of the problem, and of the growing effort to combat it.

Plastic Pollution: A History

1862: Alexander Parkes demonstrates the [first man-made plastic](#) at the Great International Exhibition in London. Parkesine, as he dubbed it, was made from cellulose.

1907: Leo Baekeland develops [Bakelite](#), the first synthetic, fossil-fuel based plastic made from phenol (a coal waste-product) and formaldehyde.



A telephone made from Bakelite, the first synthetic plastic.

1946: The first [National Plastics Exhibition](#) opens in New York City to showcase all the new consumer uses for the plastics developed to aid in World War II. During the war, plastic production had increased nearly four-fold.

Early 1970s: [Reports published](#) in Science about the prevalence of plastic pellets in the North Atlantic lead to more research into the prevalence of plastic on the seafloor and its impact on marine animals.

1979: [Plastic grocery bags](#) are introduced in the U.S.

1980: [Woodbury, New Jersey](#) becomes the first U.S. city to adopt a curbside recycling program following litter awareness-campaigns in the 1960s and 1970s.

1990s: Widespread use of plastic [microbeads](#) in cosmetics begins.



1997: Charles Moore discovers the [Great Pacific Garbage Patch](#), the world's largest collection of floating garbage, when sailing home to Los Angeles.

2002: Bangladesh [becomes the first country](#) to ban [plastic bags](#) after discovering they blocked drains during a severe flood.

2007: [San Francisco](#) becomes the first U.S. city to institute a plastic bag ban.

2008: A [government study](#) confirms that Bisphenol A, a chemical used to manufacture hard plastic bottles and the lining of baby-formula cans, may increase risks of early puberty, breast cancer, prostate issues and behavioral problems.

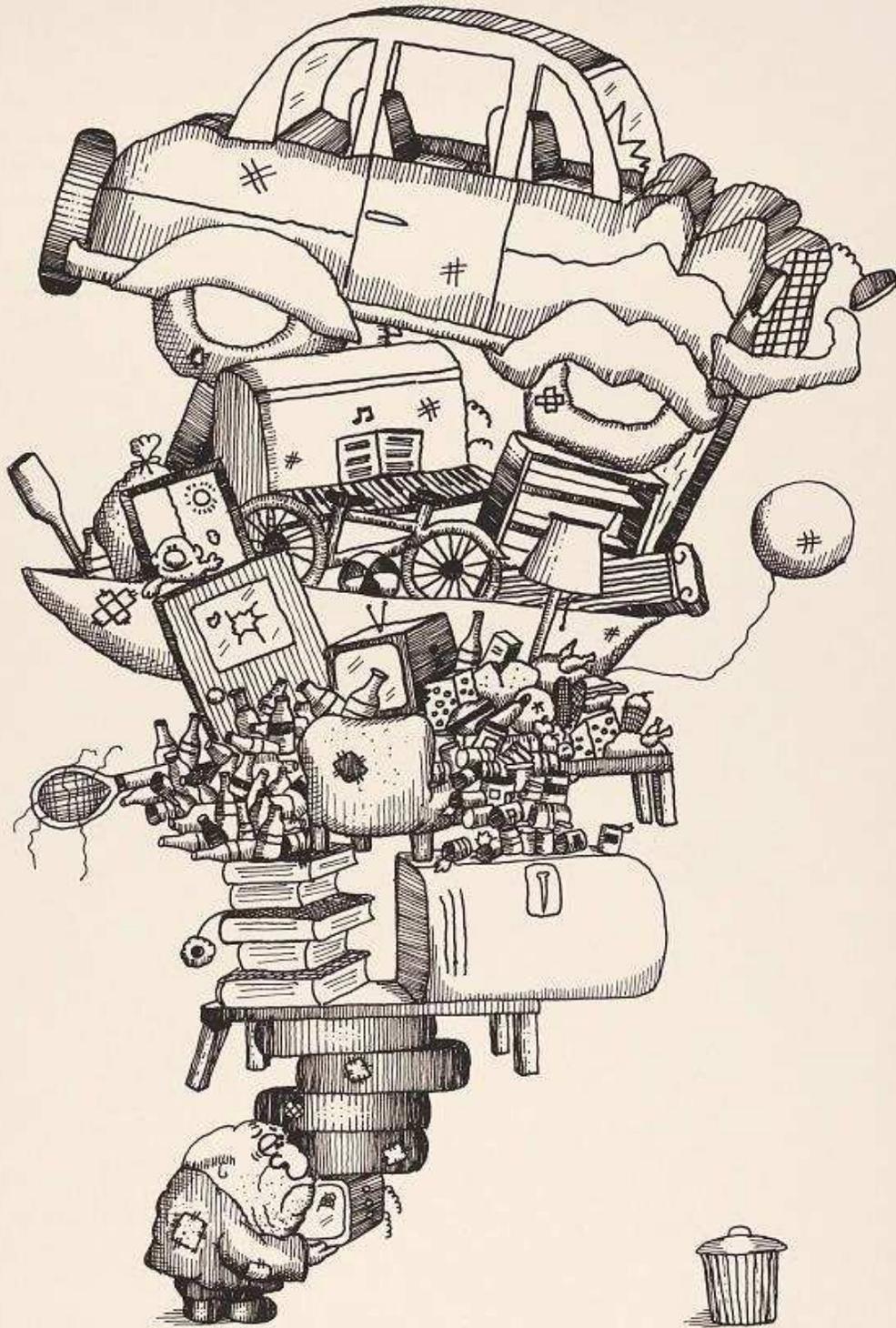
2014: [The Netherlands](#) becomes the first country to ban microbeads in cosmetics.

2017: The [BBC's Blue Planet II](#) increases global concern about ocean plastics with striking footage of how they impact ocean animals.

2018: The Earth Day Network focuses Earth Day on ending plastic pollution by 2020.



An albatross corpse filled with plastic.



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