

China's plastic action prompts global rethink

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Illustration: Liu Rui/GT

The fallout from China's decision to stop accepting certain categories of waste is continuing to affect policies on recycling in the rest of the world, particularly in the UK and the rest of Europe.

The ban, which came into force on January 1, prohibits 24 categories of waste, including polyethylene terephthalate (Pet) drinks bottles, other plastic bottles and containers, and all mixed paper, the Guardian reported. In 2016, developed countries that include the US, the UK and Japan sent 7.3 million tons of plastic waste to China, the report said.

The EU exports half of its collected plastics, and 85 percent of that was sent to China, AFP reported Sunday. The report quoted Arnaud Brunet, head of the Bureau of International Recycling, as saying that China's ban has been an "earthquake" for countries that depend on it to deal with their waste. The effect will send ripples across the global recycling industry.

Some observers say that these waste exporting nations will merely look for other destinations for their trash - eyeing other emerging economies such as India, Pakistan or other developing nations in Southeast Asia. The BBC reported in early January that the British recycling sector does not know what to do with the buildup of plastic and paper waste, and this would mean more use of landfill and incineration.

As trash piles up in developed countries, they may have to look at stop-gap solutions. But this will only be adding to the waste crisis that already exists in the developing world, particularly in nations around the Asia-Pacific. A report at the end of 2017 identified 10 major river systems as the source of 90 percent of the plastic waste dumped into the world's oceans - some 8 million tons annually. Of these rivers, two - the Nile and Niger, are in Africa, but eight are in Asia, including major rivers in China - the Pearl, Yellow and Yangtze, as well as the Ganges and Indus in the Indian subcontinent and the Mekong in Southeast Asia.

It would seem that the last thing any of these nations needs is to increase imports of plastic waste, and they should follow China's ban on importing it, if they do not have the capacity to deal with what they already produce.

Of course, this is just one side of the story. In recent weeks, both the EU and separately, the UK have announced new strategies to deal with plastic waste, especially the scourge of single-used plastics, such as coffee cups, straws and take-out food containers. Many observers stated that it was China's ban that had refocused the minds of politicians in this area, but there had also been growing public sentiment and public awareness campaigns on some of these issues in Britain and Europe, as well as a growing awareness that the planet is drowning under a tidal wave of trash - clothing, wasted food, electronic goods as well as plastic - and that this cannot continue.

It seems the time is right to strike. People have already become accustomed to taking their own reusable bags to the store - or rather, they wish to avoid paying for one. Many have been shocked by reports of how few disposable coffee cups can be recycled, or the effect of plastic straws on marine life. The BBC's *Blue Planet II* documentary series, which devoted a whole episode to marine plastic pollution, showed albatross parents attempting to feed plastic to their chicks, and a pilot whale carrying her dead calf that likely died because it ingested plastic. The scenes prompted a huge outpouring from viewers - from people vowing to never use a plastic bag again, to those vehemently claiming they would never let plastic darken their door.

This may be what prompted British Prime Minister Theresa May - surely in need of some good headlines - to unveil a plan to eliminate all avoidable plastic waste in the next 25 years, including plastic-free aisles in stores, encouraging industry to take responsibility for waste and a research budget to fund "plastic innovation."

Hard on the heels of the UK initiative, the EU announced a plastic plan of its own. The EU Commission issued a press release on January 16 that said there was a "strong business case" for transforming the way products are used in the EU - it wants to curb plastic waste, make recycling profitable for businesses, stop marine littering and spur global change - a highly ambitious agenda.

The EU wants all plastic packaging to be recyclable by 2030, the consumption of single-use plastics to be reduced and the intentional use of microplastics restricted. Again, there is cash for research, as well as rules to govern labeling and recycling, in an effort to work toward the goal of a circular economy - one in which very little is wasted.

Environmentalists have praised the EU's approach as going further than the British plan - but both "lack teeth" and are so far woolly on specifics. Then industries, such as food and beverage manufacturers and retailers and packaging manufacturers must also be brought on board. Coca-Cola, which has a massive plastics footprint, pledged on Friday to recycle a can or bottle for every one sold by 2030, the BBC reported. The company markets more than 500 brands of beverages, and many come in colored plastic bottles which cannot currently be recycled.

The EU also said it would encourage the installation and use of water fountains to cut down on plastic water bottles - but it is companies like Coca-Cola that have encouraged consumers to pay for water instead of getting it free from a tap in countries where it is safe to do so.

Yet in the US and Japan, both big plastic exporters, so far little has been said. In the way that for years, the developed world has exported its carbon emissions to the developing, as long as people in Britain or France recycled at home, we were smug that we'd done the right thing - not considering where the plastic ended up.

Some Chinese companies have said they are dependent on this plastic waste for their business - workers have been laid off, according to the AFP report. But Chinese environmentalists say this is also a good opportunity for China to seize control of its own waste and recycling industry - surely China produces enough of its own waste to supply businesses that need it. I know from my own experience in Beijing that only lip-service is paid to proper recycling - most people pay no attention to throwing the trash in the specific bin meant for that type of waster, nor are given instructions on what can and can't be recycled. Garbage collection still relies on migrant workers on tricycles.

In any case, at least as public opinion and political rhetoric is concerned, the momentum for now seems to be on the side of fighting the plastic tide. Whether this can be translated into concrete action, and companies and the public will join in, remains to be seen.

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