



HONG KONG: This handout photo taken and released by AFP by Hong Kong Cleanup shows people clearing rubbish away from a beach. — AFP photos



HONG KONG: Volunteers posing with all the rubbish collected and bagged for removal at a beach in Hong Kong.

## PLASTIC PARADISE: HONG KONG'S PACKAGING PROBLEM

### 'REDUCE, RE-USE, RECYCLE'

**HONG KONG:** A little girl shrieks with excitement as she strolls along the beach: "Oh look mummy. Hong Kong snow." Despite the cold snap what she's pointing to is not a meteorological anomaly—but in fact swathes of polystyrene thrown out as rubbish. The city is suffocating under a film of plastic: "Each day the equivalent weight of two A380 Airbus planes is discarded" in domestic waste, says Lisa Christensen, co-founder of HK Clean Up initiative.

Add to this trashed industrial and commercial plastic, and more than 2,000 tons of the material is thrown out daily in Hong Kong—saturating landfill sites but also clogging up country parks, coastal areas and waterways. "For our supermarket generation the focus is on convenience, issues of pollution seem very far away," says local environmental campaigner Jo Wilson, whose daughter highlighted the "Hong Kong snow" problem. "People produce double digit pieces of trash—especially plastic—just by having lunch. Hong Kong has an army of cleaners and helpers so perhaps some people are not used to taking care," she explains, adding a long hours culture, excessive packaging by the food industry, and lack of public education are exacerbating the problem.

Globally plastics production has surged from 15 million tons in 1964 to 311 million tons in 2014 — the weight of 900 Empire State Buildings — and is expected to double in 20 years as demand grows, according to "The New Plastics Economy" report presented by the Ellen MacArthur Foundation at the World Economic Forum in January. The situation in Hong Kong is pronounced because it is "an extremely consumption-based society," Christensen says. "On average we generate 1.36kg (3lbs) of domestic waste per person, per day. Tokyo, on the other hand, only generates 0.77kg."

#### Cheaper to buy new

While there has been some success encouraging people to recycle paper and some metals, the situation is deteriorating for plastics: Just five percent of plastic was sent for recycling in 2014 — compared with 25 percent in 2005, according to government figures. Recycling is not mandatory in Hong Kong, but efforts by authorities to push the practice have been undermined by media reports revealing items separated after use by consumers have ended up being mixed up or dumped. There

is also little incentive for plastics recycling contractors in the city, — their profits are dented by costs of transport and sorting, and with low global oil prices new plastic is cheaper for manufacturers to buy than reworked material. Due to limited facilities, most items are processed in mainland China.

People should adopt the "reduce, re-use, recycle" philosophy argues Louisa Ho, executive director of The Nature Conservancy, Hong Kong, calling for a wholesale change in the public's consumption patterns, and warning the city is at "saturation point" with landfill due to reach capacity in 2018. In 2014, an estimated 1.4 million bottles, and 1,000 tons of plastic bags were thrown out each day. Plastic bag use has dropped since the government introduced a levy on them last year, but in a city where supermarkets routinely wrap individual fruit and vegetables, campaigners want legislation restricting packaging.

"Plastic wrapping leaks harmful chemicals into our food and bodies, and into the environment," argues Megan Tanner, who is petitioning authorities and food retailers to take action. A spokesman for the Environmental Protection Department (EPD) said it had to

consider "food hygiene" when setting rules. Critics say there is a lack of joined-up thinking on the issue of waste—for example visitors to the popular "Out to Sea? The Plastic Garbage Project" at Hong Kong's Science Museum are given plastic single-use covers for their wet umbrellas, and can only buy water in bottles. Christensen insists consumer attitudes are changing. The 2015 Hong Kong Clean Up initiative saw tens of thousands of volunteers collect a record 5.6 million pieces of trash in just a few weeks.

#### 'More plastic than fish'

Eight million tons of plastic ends up in the world's oceans annually, the "New Plastics Economy" report said. "This is the equivalent to dumping the contents of one garbage truck into the ocean every minute. If no action is taken, this is expected to increase to two per minute by 2030 and four per minute by 2050," it stated. It also warned that within 35 years there would be more plastic than fish in the ocean, measuring by weight.

International marine charity Plastic Oceans describes Hong Kong as "a hot spot for marine plastic debris". As well as fish and birds, recent-

ly green turtles, a protected species, have washed up on its beaches after dying from ingesting rubbish.

"They found a 50cm long string of trash in a turtle's stomach which included nylon threads and plastic bags. Turtles often confuse floating plastic bags for one of their favorite food sources, jellyfish," says Christensen, adding that humans too are at risk. "It's not just plastic bottles and pieces of Styrofoam that are threatening our marine wildlife, tiny micro plastics contained in our toiletries, cosmetics and washing detergents are having hugely detrimental effects and making their way into our food chain."

Canada and the US have moved to ban microbeads in personal care items due to environmental concerns. A spokeswoman for the EPD said its marine data for Hong Kong showed "levels of toxic substances did not exceed" international standards, but local campaign group Plastic Free Seas warns action is needed now to avoid toxins building up. Overall, Wilson remains hopeful attitudes are shifting: "I believe there will be a time when overusing plastics and packaging will be seen in the same way smoking inside is now." — AFP



TOKYO, Japan : Zookeepers capture a zookeeper dressed as zebra (bottom) during a drill to practice what to do in the event of an animal escape at the Ueno Zoo yesterday. — AFP

## TOKYO ZOO STAGES 'ZEBRA ESCAPE'

**TOKYO:** A zebra escaped from its enclosure in a Japanese zoo yesterday, giving one keeper a heart attack and injuring another at least that was the scenario of a drill aimed at dealing with runaway animals. The zebra—actually a zoo staff member dressed up in a furry suit—supposedly bolted from a cage at Tokyo's Ueno Zoo after an earthquake destroyed its enclosure. It then wandered around the zoo before ramming into a wall and sending a keeper to hospital with a heart attack. After injuring another keeper, the zebra was subdued with a fake stun gun and bundled onto a nearby pick-up truck, as

curious zoo visitors looked on, laughing and taking photos.

"The zebra is an animal that easily panics," said 27-year-old Yumi Tamura, who dressed as the zebra but usually cares for gorillas and monkeys. "I myself felt panicky when acting it out," she told reporters. Past simulations at Tokyo's city-run zoos have featured faux gorillas, rhinos, lions and orangutans making a break for freedom. "Every year, a keeper plays the role of an escaping animal," said an Ueno zoo spokesman. "They know how the animals would act in the event of disaster and their escape." — AFP

## DUTCH NGO OFFERS PREGNANT WOMEN WITH ZIKA FREE ONLINE ABORTION AID

**THE HAGUE:** A Dutch NGO said yesterday it has launched an international effort offering pregnant women infected with the Zika virus free pills to trigger an abortion, aiming to halt any rush towards unsafe terminations. "The Zika virus is now spreading to most of the countries where abortion is very restricted," Rebecca Gomperts, founder and director of Women on Web told AFP. "We are extremely worried that this might cause increasing unsafe abortions. We really care about women's health and lives and we want to make sure that women have access to a good medical abortion."

The World Health Organization on Monday said a surge in serious birth defects in South America was "strongly suspected" of being caused by the mosquito-borne Zika virus and constituted an international health emergency. It comes amid a regional surge in cases of microcephaly—a devastating condition in which a baby is born with an abnormally small head and brain. Gomperts said women who feared their unborn child might be affected could contact the service on [www.womenonweb.org](http://www.womenonweb.org) for a free online consultation. If there are no contraindications, then a package of pills to abort the foetus with instruc-

tions for use would be mailed to their home address. A "medical abortion" is a combination of two different pills to trigger a non-surgical termination and can be used up to the 12th week of pregnancy, Gomperts said. Women on Web was set up in 2005 to support access to safe abortions around the world, and currently answer about 10,000 emails a month from women seeking advice on a variety of issues.

#### Early action

Gomperts did not want to reveal how many medical abortion packages are sent each month, but she brushed aside any criticism saying: "Our goal is to save women's lives." Women on Web is asking women to state if they are infected with Zika for research purposes, but say the organization will "accept any reason that women have" for wanting an abortion. WHO warned last week that Zika virus was "spreading explosively" in the Americas, and said the region could see up to four million Zika cases this year alone. Brazil, which has become the worst affected country with some 4,000 suspected cases of microcephaly is also the world's largest Catholic country by population and places tight restrictions on abortion. — AFP

## AMERICANS SAY THEY ARE TRYING TO CUT SUGAR INTAKE

**NEW YORK:** Americans say they are on a sugar detox. A Reuters/Ipsos poll of 1,883 adults living in the United States, conducted Jan 15-21, finds that 58 percent say they tried to limit sugar in their diets in the previous 30 days. That is higher than the percentage of those who were targeting reductions in their intake of calories, sodium, fats, cholesterol or carbohydrates. Only 39 percent said they had not tried to cut sugar intake. Last month, the US government said that Americans should seek to keep their intake of added sugars, which is sugar added during processing or preparation of foods, to less than 10 percent of daily calories, the first time it had recommended a specific limit.

That would translate to a cut of about one-third for the average American, but a significantly higher reduction for teenagers, who eat about 17 percent of their calories in added sugars. Of the people surveyed, 50 percent said they have tried to cut down on calories, 48 percent sodium, 46 percent for both saturated fats and trans fat/trans fatty acid, 43 percent cholesterol and 40 percent carbohydrates. And while the number of people who weren't planning cuts in calories, sodium and fats roughly matched those hoping to reduce intake, just 39 percent of respondents said they had no intention of cutting down on sugar.

To be sure, the survey asked people about their attempts to limit sugar, not about their success rate in doing so, and notoriously short-lived New Year's resolutions may account for some of the responses. There is also no directly comparable poll for previous years. But the poll results may reflect the impact of the increasing concerns expressed by health advocates about links between high-sugar diets and levels of obesity. This "war on sugar" has grown in scope over the last few years beyond just sodas and candy to packaged foods like cereal and pasta sauce.

Google Trends data show that online search interest in the term "added sugar" is on the rise. It reached the height of its popularity in the United States last month, data going back to 2004 show. Searches for cholesterol, sodium or saturated fat exceeded those for sugar, but their popularity was trending lower or stable. Searches for "is sugar bad" were significantly more popular than the same searches for cholesterol, sodium, and saturated fat.

A spokeswoman for the Sugar Association, which represents U.S. sugar companies and grower-cooperatives, said that limits on sugar are "the low hanging fruit in the fight against obesity," adding that the real culprit behind obesity has been a rise in calories from things other than sugar since 1970.

#### Surprised by sugar

Austin Dennis, a student from Chilton County, Alabama, who responded to the Reuters/Ipsos poll, turned to the Internet for answers to his struggle with weight about a year ago. "One day, I put on my pants, the button broke, and I thought, 'OK, it's time to do something different,'" he said. The 20-year old watched a YouTube video about eating healthily and bought "Fat Chance," a book by anti-sugar advocate Robert Lustig. He gave up sweet tea and stopped eating Kellogg Co's Froot Loops and the other sugary cereals.

"I didn't realize how much sugar was in stuff, that really surprised me," Dennis said. Companies

have started to offer more low-sugar products to customers with Kellogg promising to cut sugar to 10 grams or less for every 30-gram serving in 90 percent of its cereals by 2020. The Grocery Manufacturers Association (GMA) says companies have cut sugar and carbohydrates in more than 5,500 products between 2002 and 2013. "We're committed to giving consumers more of what they want and need, and less of what they are trying to reduce," Kris Charles, a Kellogg spokeswoman said in an emailed statement.

Unit sales of sugar in stores fell nearly 4 percent last year from 2014, the oldest data provided to the press by Nielsen show, continuing a downward trend since 2011. Dollar sales declined 17 percent in value between 2011-2014, though in 2015 they recovered by 2 percent due to price rises. Major US sugar company ASR Group — the maker of Domino Sugar and C&H Sugar—declined to comment. Louis Dreyfus Commodities, the global commodities trader that owns cane refiner Imperial Sugar Co, did not respond to requests for comment.

Food companies would be required to include the amount of added sugar as a percentage of recommended daily calorie intake on their "Nutrition Facts" labels, according to a proposal from the US Food and Drug Administration. While candy maker Mars has said it supports the new dietary guidelines and the move to include "added sugars" on the labels, the GMA has questioned the scientific review behind the FDA's proposed labeling changes. Nearly two-thirds of poll respondents said they use those labels at least sometimes when deciding to buy a product.

Miryah Velazco, 39, who builds websites in Raleigh, North Carolina said she started to think about cutting sugar after summer visit to the dentist turned up eight cavities. She set out to seriously slash her intake on Jan 1 "I started looking and realizing I had been totally fooled," she said. "It's not always the stuff you'd think. Some of the all-natural granola bars have more sugar than just eating a Pop-Tart. You have to read every single label." — Reuters



HOLLYWOOD, United States : File photo shows an employee of the Hollywood Oyster company sorts and counts fresh oysters at the company farm in the waters of Chesapeake bay.— AFP

## TINY BITS OF PLASTIC THREATEN OYSTER SURVIVAL

**MIAMI:** Tiny bits of plastic that pollute the world's waters may also interfere with oysters' ability to reproduce and thrive, according to a study Monday by researchers in France and Belgium. The damage happens quickly, according to the findings of a study using Pacific oysters that were kept in tanks. Those exposed to microplastics made smaller eggs and sperm that was less mobile compared to a control group of oysters whose tank did not contain added microplastics.

After just two months of exposure to plastic pollution, oysters produced "41 percent fewer offspring, which also grew at lower rates," said the study in the Proceedings of the National

Academy of Sciences, a peer-reviewed US journal. Since microplastics are similar in size to the phytoplankton that oysters typically consume, the bivalves "readily ingested" the particles, said the study. The ocean is polluted each year with between four and 12 million tons of plastic from cosmetics, clothing, industry and improper waste management, according to background information in the article. Since plastic cannot decompose like organic waste, it breaks down into tiny particles the size of a millimeter or less. "Given their ubiquitous nature and small dimensions, the ingestion and impact of microplastics on marine life are a cause for concern," said the study. — AFP