



Fact Sheet

Plastic Removal Technologies 101



Scientists' Coalition for an Effective Plastics Treaty

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INTRODUCTION

Plastic Removal Technologies (PRTs) promise to improve environmental quality by removing plastics from the environment, but they can also threaten biodiversity. Almost no environmental impact assessments (EIAs) are done on PRTs^{1,2,3}.

Unselective PRTs can alter habitats and catch plants and animals. Manual collection selectively removes plastic, but it is limited in efficiency and effectiveness. Municipalities and communities ultimately bear the burden of plastics removal. Some PRT examples are discussed here.

Beach grooming involves the use of tractors or robots to rake or sieve the sand to remove plastic debris. It can alter beach habitats, reduce biodiversity, and destroy plants and invertebrates. When plastics are removed, plant debris (food and habitat for many animals) can also be removed.



Figure 1: Hilton Fiji Beach Resort and Spa-Denarau_Island_Viti_Levu.html Ironically, award-winning beaches are subject to more grooming and thus lower biodiversity. Source: <https://www.tripadvisor.com/LocationPhotoDirectLink-g612490-d616998-i28817204->



Figure 2: "Seabin mounted to a pontoon and anchored down to a fixed location at the University of the South Pacific, Marine Studies campus jetty". Source: Paris, Kwaaga, & Chintaka (2022).

Seabins™ are used in many harbours to trap floating trash. Two scientific evaluations in the UK and in Fiji showed that they capture small amounts of plastic (0.0059 kg per day) but many plants and animals^{4,5}. For every four pieces of plastic, the Seabin would catch one organism, and almost three quarters were dead after two days⁴. 500 Seabins™ would need to run continuously to keep even a small harbour free of floating plastics⁴. Their maintenance costs are orders of magnitude higher than those of manual cleaning⁴.

Rivers. Forty types of PRTs are used in rivers and estuaries including booms, watercraft vehicles, bubble curtains, or receptacles³. Most also remove organisms and natural flotsam, important habitats for organisms. Many PRTs target the river surface missing plastics at depth. Devices at river mouths do not remove plastics from rivers themselves. One study estimated the efficiency of river barriers to reduce plastic outflow to the ocean at 54%. Thousands of rivers would need PRTs to have a significant impact⁷. Stormwater traps (e.g., LittaTraps™) capture plastics closer to the point of release.



Figure 3: LittaTrap™ Source: <https://www.enviropod.com/products/littatrap>



Ocean surface. Ocean surface cleanups were popularized by The Ocean Cleanup® (TOC). TOC uses a net towed by two ships for up to two weeks to capture macroplastics. This results in significant bycatch, killing many surface organisms central to the functioning of food-limited ecosystems. A single device running for one year could impact 675 tons of zooplankton². In 2022, TOC caught over 667 kg of bycatch including sea turtles⁹. The floating plastics that TOC could collect are only a fraction of the plastics in the ocean. 200 TOC devices running for 130 years would only capture 5% of the world's floating plastics⁶ and release significant amounts of CO₂.



Figure 4: TOC uses a net towed by two ships for up to two weeks to capture macroplastics Source: <https://theoceancleanup.com/media-gallery/>



Figure 5: Robotic systems to clean ocean waste. Source: <https://roboticsandautomationnews.com/2020/06/15/5-ways-robots-are-being-used-to-clean-up-the-worlds-oceans/33050/>

Seafloor. Much of the plastics in the ocean accumulates on the seafloor. Recent EU-projects aim to remove plastics from the seafloor using autonomous vehicles, robotic systems, and artificial intelligence¹. Such complex systems will be costly and it is questionable if they will ever be technically mature. Trawling for plastics, like bottom fishing, is likely associated with high bycatch mortality and damage to habitats. [Fishing-for-Litter](#) initiatives, in which fishers collect plastic debris during fishing operations, can reduce plastics on the seafloor at low additional effort and inspire behavioural change¹⁰. Manual collection by divers comes with health and safety risks and is limited in scale.

Scale. PRTs cannot scale up to the rapidly increasing scale and complexity of the plastics crisis. Worldwide, coastlines cover hundreds of thousands of kilometres. The ocean has a water volume of 1.37 billion km³ covering 361 million km², and rivers stretch over an area of 773,000 km². The Pacific Island region alone includes 30,000 islands and 15 countries scattered across 165.25 million square kilometres (ca. 33% of the Earth's surface). No PRTs have been evaluated for their removal efficiency¹.



Figure 6: Plastic rubbish scattered along beach. Source: <https://foe.scot/campaign/plastic-pollution/>



Figure 7: Creative Cans in the Sand, will help clean up the growing trash problem on the beach. (PHOTO/Jerry Hume, Staff). Source: <https://www.pinterest.com/pin/357473289146481223/>

Reuse, recycling, and disposal. Plastics collected using PRT or manual cleanups can almost never be reused nor recycled: over 13,000 chemicals are known to be used in plastics production, a quarter of which are categorized hazardous¹¹. Plastics also attract other environmental pollutants once they are in nature and are subject to weathering¹². In places like the large ocean small island developing states of the Pacific region (the safe and sustainable disposal of collected plastics presents significant challenges due to limited land for landfills and options for the safe disposal of hazardous materials. The best option is prevention coupled with removal of plastic out of the region before it becomes a persistent environmental and biological hazard.

¹Bellou, N., Gambardella, C., Karantzalos, K., Monteiro, J. G., Canning-Clode, J., Kemna, S., ... & Lemmen, C. (2021). Global assessment of innovative solutions to tackle marine litter. *Nature Sustainability*, 4(6), 516-524. doi:10.1038/s41893-021-00726-2
²Falk-Andersson, J., Larsen Haarr, M., & Havas, V. (2020). Basic principles for development and implementation of plastic clean-up technologies: What can we learn from fisheries management? *Science of The Total Environment*, 745, 141117. doi:https://doi.org/10.1016/j.scitotenv.2020.141117
³Leone, G., Catarino, A. I., Pauwels, I., Manil, T., Tishler, M., Egger, M., ... & Everaert, G. (2022). Integrating Bayesian Belief Networks in a toolbox for decision support on plastic clean-up technologies in rivers and estuaries. *Environmental Pollution*, 296, 118721. DOI: 10.1016/j.envpol.2021.118721
⁴Parker-Jurd, F. N., Smith, N. S., Gibson, L., Nuojua, S., & Thompson, R. C. (2022). Evaluating the performance of the 'Seabin'-A fixed point mechanical litter removal device for sheltered waters. *Marine Pollution Bulletin*, 184, 114199. DOI: 10.1016/j.marpolbul.2022.114199
⁵Paris, A., Kwaoga, A., & Hewavitharane, C. (2022). An assessment of floating marine debris within the breakwaters of the University of the South Pacific, Marine Studies Campus at Laucala Bay. *Marine Pollution Bulletin*, 174, 113290. DOI: 10.1016/j.marpolbul.2021.113290
⁶Hohn, S., Acevedo-Trejos, E., Abrams, J. F., de Moura, J. F., Spranz, R., & Merico, A. (2020). The long-term legacy of plastic mass production. *Science of the Total Environment*, 746, 141115. DOI: 10.1016/j.scitotenv.2020.141115
⁷Meijer, L. J., Van Emmerik, T., Van Der Ent, R., Schmidt, C., & Lebreton, L. (2021). More than 1000 rivers account for 80% of global riverine plastic emissions into the ocean. *Science Advances*, 7(18), eaaz5803. DOI: 10.1126/sciadv.aaz5803
⁸Chong, F., Spencer, M., Maximenko, N., Hafner, J., McWhirter, A. C., & Helm, R. R. (2023). High concentrations of floating neustonic life in the plastic-rich North Pacific Garbage Patch. *Plos Biology*, 21(5), e3001646. DOI: 10.1371/journal.pbio.3001646
⁹The Ocean Cleanup (2023). Cleaning the ocean garbage patches. Rotterdam, The Netherlands. <https://theoceancleanup.com/oceans/> (accessed 06/08/2023)

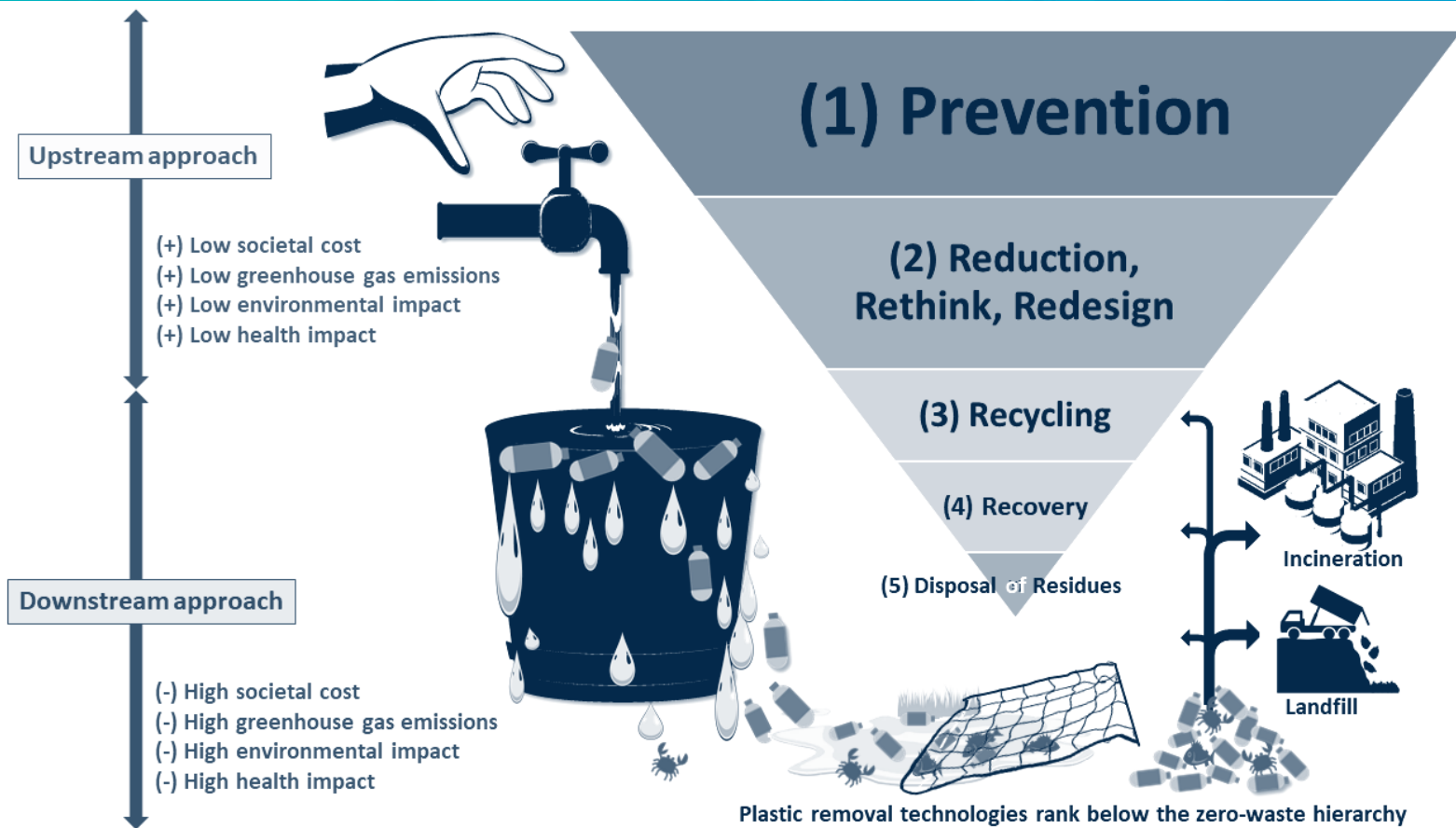


Key Messages

PRTs distract resources from efficient preventive actions; do not address rapidly growing global plastic production; and can give people a false sense of security. The plastics industry may start funding PRTs as a form of ‘greenwashing’ including related extended producer responsibility or plastic credits schemes, analogous to failure of ‘carbon capture schemes’.

This will further externalize the costs of plastics production onto non-producing countries like PSIDS, municipalities, communities, and consumers. Science-based criteria are needed to assess the impact of PRTs on the economy, human health, and the environment to avoid unwanted consequences.

The most effective and low-cost interventions will be guided by global legally binding control measures¹³ underpinned by preventive and precautionary principles and the toxic-free zero-waste hierarchy¹⁴.



¹⁰Wyles, K. J., Pahl, S., Carroll, L., & Thompson, R. C. (2019). An evaluation of the Fishing For Litter (FFL) scheme in the UK in terms of attitudes, behavior, barriers and opportunities. *Marine Pollution Bulletin*, 144, 48-60. doi:https://doi.org/10.1016/j.marpolbul.2019.04.035

¹¹United Nations Environment Programme and Secretariat of the Basel, Rotterdam and Stockholm Conventions, "Chemicals in plastics: a technical report," (Geneva, Switzerland, 2023). <https://www.unep.org/resources/report/chemicals-plastics-technical-report>

¹²Tekman, M. B., Walther, B. A., Peter, C., Gutow, L., & Bergmann, M. (2022). Impacts of Plastic Pollution in the Oceans on Marine Species, Biodiversity and Ecosystems. Berlin: <https://zenodo.org/record/5898684#.YRGUzLxI6X>

¹³Simon, N., Raubenheimer, K., Urho, N., Unger, S., Azoulay, D., Farrelly, T., ... & Weiland, L. (2021). A binding global agreement to address the life cycle of plastics. *Science*, 373(6550), 43-47. doi:10.1126/science.aba9010.

¹⁴Simon, J. M. (Producer). (2019). A zero waste hierarchy for Europe. <https://zerowasteurope.eu/2019/05/a-zero-waste-hierarchy-for-europe/>

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A resilient Pacific environment sustaining our livelihoods
and natural heritage in harmony with our cultures.



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