OPA

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Are we there yet?

According to the experts at Grantham Institute, Imperial College London, plastic waste from the UK has been tracked to the Arctic, where it contributes to the problem of plastic pollution in the marine environment.

Over the last decade it has become clear that the plastic waste discarded on land whether deliberately, or carelessly by accident, eventually finds its way into the sea, and with an estimated 8 – 10 million tonnes of plastic waste going into the oceans each year, the problem is only going to get worse.

It is difficult to do without plastic as there is nothing quite like it for protecting food and other goods from damage or contamination and getting them home from the shops. Unfortunately, conventional, old fashioned plastic has a serious downside, in that as well as being strong, flexible and waterproof, it is incredibly durable. Which is fine if it can be collected for recycling, energy recovery or safe disposal, but not if it finds its way into the open environment, where it can be around for decades on land or sea, causing a visual intrusion, blocking water courses and endangering wildlife. The more plastic accumulating on land, the more plastic likely to find its way into the world's oceans.

The frustrating thing is that the technology to combat the problem of plastic waste in the environment has been around for a couple of decades, but governments have been slow to act. Yes, there needs to be better consumer education, more rigorous collection and recycling facilities and stronger penalties and consequences for careless disposal, but we also need to be smarter in the type of plastic we use.

Oxo-biodegradable plastic is for all intents and purposes indistinguishable from conventional plastic, but it has a crucial difference in that it will disappear in months rather than years. The useful life of the bag or packaging can be controlled at manufacture (typically 12 – 24 months). If collected during its useful life it can be recycled with other plastic products, but if it escapes collection, it will degrade and biodegrade in the open environment (on land or sea) in the same way as a leaf, only quicker and leaving nothing behind. No fragments of plastic or toxic residues.

Better still it can be made in existing plastic factories with the existing workforce and machinery at little or no extra cost, so it could be making a difference - right now. In fact several countries in Africa, Asia and the Middle East have legislated to make this technology mandatory because it works.

So what are we waiting for?