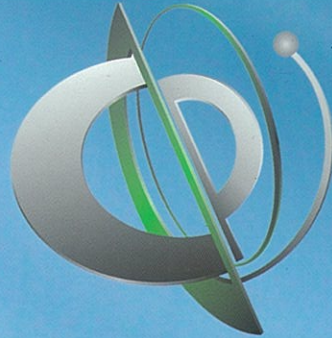


AS SEEN ON CTV



THE DAILY PLANET BOOK OF COOL IDEAS

Global Warming and What People
Are Doing About It



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Americans work their way through something like a hundred billion plastic bags every year.

The Ocean as Landfill Ian Connacher

It's a tangled web, this climate change stuff. It bleeds into every other environmental issue: habitat loss, biodiversity, pollution, spread of disease, and the price of oil, to name a few. Climate change is the overriding issue of our time, but even if it weren't, anyone concerned about the environment would inevitably bump up against it.

In his recent film *Addicted to Plastic* (slated for broadcast in several countries), Toronto filmmaker Ian Connacher records his journey around the world sizing up the problem of discarded plastic. What's the link between plastic and global warming? You need oil to make plastic, and a lot of plastic is being made. For instance, Americans work their way through something like a hundred billion plastic bags every year, sucking up twelve million barrels of oil along the way. That's reason enough to be concerned about our reliance on plastic. But this is not so much an issue of oil consumption or emission of greenhouse gases as of attitudes and habits.



▲ There's no trouble finding plastic in the North Pacific Central Gyre.

Take this example: once Connacher had his epiphany (“When I woke up and realized just how much plastic I touched in a day, I knew I had to do something”), he hitched a ride on a boat travelling to the North Pacific Central Gyre, a vast area of the Pacific Ocean where the atmosphere presses down on the water, actually depressing it, and allowing garbage to swirl inward and concentrate

toward the middle. But the “middle” is an area the size of western Europe, and while it is *full* of plastic, Connacher found it might not look that way at first glance.

“In my mind I had an image of a floating landfill out here, but it's not that. It's a chunk here, a piece there, but when you do it for an hour, and realize just how small the section is that you are able to search, and the fact

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(continued)

that only half of all plastics float, you begin to get a sense of just how much plastic must be out here.”

The gyre is home to plastic in its myriad forms: bottles, nets, light switch covers, even fluorescent tubes. Eighty percent of this floating garbage comes from the land; in some areas of the ocean, the ratio by weight of plastic to phytoplankton, the plants of the sea surface, is ten to one. All this plastic has been spilled or thrown away. And, Connacher notes, “Every piece that’s ever been made, except for a small amount that has been incinerated, still exists.”

Connacher does find room for optimism: scientists working on commercially viable biodegradable plastics; entrepreneurs

turning waste plastic into new products (as we’ll see on page 184, Interface Carpets would love to start mining landfills, arguing that they are the oil wells of the future). Even so, the overwhelming images in his film are of seas, hills, beaches, and mountains of plastic, evidence of our ignorance of, or carelessness about, exactly what we’re doing. In the end, once you have the knowledge, it’s all about attitude. And that’s what connects plastic to all other environmental issues, including global warming. As Peter Applebome put it simply and directly in *The New York Times*, “If we can’t change our behaviour to deal with this one, we can’t change our behaviour to deal with anything.”



▲ Signs of the present ...

▼ ... and of the future.

