Transport and release of chemicals from plastics to the environment and to wildlife


Marine Biology and Ecology Research Centre, Marine Institute, University of Plymouth, A403 Portland Square, Drake Circus, Plymouth PL4 8AA, United Kingdom; School of Engineering and Electronics, University of Edinburgh, Old College, South Bridge Edinburgh EH8 9YL, United Kingdom; Department of Civil, Construction and Environmental Engineering, North Carolina State University, PO Box 7908, Raleigh, NC 27695, United States; Department of Water and Environmental Studies, Linköping University, SE-581 83, Linköping, Sweden; Marine Biology and Ecology Research Centre, Marine Institute, University of Plymouth, Drake Circus, Plymouth PL4 8AA, United Kingdom; School of Biosciences, University of Exeter, Stocker Road, Exeter, EX4 4QD, United Kingdom; Graduate School of Fisheries, Hokkaido University, Hakodate, Hokkaido 041-8611, Japan; Algalita Marine Research Foundation, 148 Marina Drive Long Beach, CA 90803, United States; Research Centre for Environmental Technology and Sustainable Development (CETASD), Hanoi University of Science, Vietnam National University, 334 Nguyen Trai Street, Thanh Xuan District, Hanoi, Viet Nam; Economic, Social and Cultural Observation Unit, Office of the Council of Minister, Sahapoan Russi Blvd., Phnom Penh, Cambodia; Science Education Department, De La Salle University, 2401 Taft Avenue, Malate, 1004 Manila, Philippines; Environmental Research and Training Center, Bangkok, Technopolis, Klong 5, Klong Luang, Pathumthani 12120, Thailand; Department of Environmental Sciences, Faculty of Environmental Studies, Universiti Putra Malaysia, 43400 UPM, Serdang, Selangor Darul Ehsan, Malaysia; National Institute of Public Health, Samsenthai road, Ban Kao-Gnod, Sisattanak District, Vientiane Municipality, Democratic Republic Congo; Laboratory of Organic Geochemistry (LOG), Tokyo University of Agriculture and Technology, Fuchu, Tokyo 183-8509, Japan

Abstract: Plastics debris in the marine environment, including resin pellets, fragments and microscopic plastic fragments, contain organic contaminants, including polychlorinated biphenyls (PCBs), polycyclic aromatic hydrocarbons, petroleum hydrocarbons, organochlorine pesticides (2,2′-bis(p-chlorophenyl)-1,1,1-trichloroethane, hexachlorinated hexanes), polybrominated diphenylethers, alkylphenols and bisphenol A, at concentrations from sub ng g\(^{-1}\) to μg g\(^{-1}\). Some of these compounds are added during plastics manufacture, while others adsorb from the surrounding seawater. Concentrations of hydrophobic contaminants adsorbed on plastics showed distinct spatial variations reflecting global pollution patterns. Model calculations and experimental observations consistently show that polyethylene accumulates more organic contaminants than other plastics such as polypropylene and polyvinyl chloride. Both a mathematical model using equilibrium partitioning and experimental data have demonstrated the transfer of contaminants from plastic to organisms. A feeding experiment indicated that PCBs could transfer from contaminated plastics to streaked shearwater chicks. Plasticizers, other plastics additives and constitutional monomers also present potential threats in terrestrial environments because they can leach from waste disposal sites into groundwater and/or
surfacewaters. Leaching and degradation of plasticizers and polymers are complex phenomena dependent on environmental conditions in the landfill and the chemical properties of each additive. Bisphenol A concentrations in leachates from municipal waste disposal sites in tropical Asia ranged from sub μg l⁻¹ to μg l⁻¹ and were correlated with the level of economic development. © 2009 The Royal Society.

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Correspondence Address: Takada, H.; Laboratory of Organic Geochemistry (LOG), Tokyo University of Agriculture and Technology, Fuchu, Tokyo 183-8509, Japan; email: shige@cc.tuat.ac.jp

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Authors with affiliations:
• Teuten, E.L., Marine Biology and Ecology Research Centre, Marine Institute, University of Plymouth, A403 Portland Square, Drake Circus, Plymouth PL4 8AA, United Kingdom, School of Engineering and Electronics, University of Edinburgh, Old College, South Bridge Edinburgh EH8 9YL, United Kingdom
• Saquing, J.M., Department of Civil, Construction and Environmental Engineering, North Carolina State University, PO Box 7908, Raleigh, NC 27695, United States
• Knappe, D.R.U., Department of Civil, Construction and Environmental Engineering, North Carolina State University, PO Box 7908, Raleigh, NC 27695, United States
• Barlaz, M.A., Department of Civil, Construction and Environmental Engineering, North Carolina State University, PO Box 7908, Raleigh, NC 27695, United States
• Jonsson, S., Department of Water and Environmental Studies, Linköping University, SE-581 83, Linköping, Sweden
• Björn, A., Department of Water and Environmental Studies, Linköping University, SE-581 83, Linköping, Sweden
• Rowland, S.J., Marine Biology and Ecology Research Centre, Marine Institute, University of Plymouth, Drake Circus, Plymouth PL4 8AA, United Kingdom
• Thompson, R.C., Marine Biology and Ecology Research Centre, Marine Institute, University of Plymouth, A403 Portland Square, Drake Circus, Plymouth PL4 8AA, United Kingdom
• Galloway, T.S., School of Biosciences, University of Exeter, Stocker Road, Exeter, EX4 4QD, United Kingdom
• Yamashita, R., Graduate School of Fisheries, Hokkaido University, Hakodate, Hokkaido 041-8611, Japan
• Ochi, D., Graduate School of Fisheries, Hokkaido University, Hakodate, Hokkaido 041-8611, Japan
• Watanuki, Y., Graduate School of Fisheries, Hokkaido University, Hakodate, Hokkaido 041-8611, Japan
• Moore, C., Algalita Marine Research Foundation, 148 Marina Drive Long Beach, CA 90803, United States
• Viet, P.H., Research Centre for Environmental Technology and Sustainable Development (CETASD), Hanoi University of Science, Vietnam National University, 334 Nguyen Trai Street, Thanh Xuan District, Hanoi, Viet Nam
• Tana, T.S., Economic, Social and Cultural Observation Unit, Office of the Council of Minister, Sahapoan Russi Blvd., Phnom Penh, Cambodia
• Prudente, M., Science Education Department, De La Salle University, 2401 Taft Avenue, Malate, 1004 Manila, Philippines
• Boonyatumanond, R., Environmental Research and Training Center, Bangkok, Technopolis, Klong 5, Klong Luang, Pathumthani 12120, Thailand
• Zakaria, M.P., Department of Environmental Sciences, Faculty of Environmental Studies, Universiti Putra Malaysia, 43400 UPM, Serdang, Selangor Darul Ehsan, Malaysia
• Akkhavong, K., National Institute of Public Health, Samsenthai road, Ban Kao-Gnod, Sisattanak District, Vientiane Municipality, Democratic Republic Congo
• Ogata, Y., Laboratory of Organic Geochemistry (LOG), Tokyo University of Agriculture and Technology, Fuchu, Tokyo 183-8509, Japan
• Hirai, H., Laboratory of Organic Geochemistry (LOG), Tokyo University of Agriculture and Technology, Fuchu, Tokyo 183-8509, Japan
• Iwasa, S., Laboratory of Organic Geochemistry (LOG), Tokyo University of Agriculture and Technology, Fuchu, Tokyo 183-8509, Japan
• Mizukawa, K., Laboratory of Organic Geochemistry (LOG), Tokyo University of Agriculture and Technology, Fuchu, Tokyo 183-8509, Japan
• Hagino, Y., Laboratory of Organic Geochemistry (LOG), Tokyo University of Agriculture and Technology, Fuchu, Tokyo 183-8509, Japan
• Imamura, A., Laboratory of Organic Geochemistry (LOG), Tokyo University of Agriculture and Technology, Fuchu, Tokyo 183-8509, Japan
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