New ocean garbage patch discovered

A 4th garbage collection zone, this one in the South Pacific, emerges.

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Tons of millions of tons of plastic debris floats in the world's oceans. (Photo: Rich Carey/Shutterstock)

The Great Pacific Garbage Patch is a mess of trash and plastic that moves around the north Pacific Ocean and is roughly the size of Texas. It has a high concentration of plastics and chemical sludge. Photos from the patch of trapped sea turtles and tires will snare the attention of even the most stone-hearted cynic.

A second plastic gyre was discovered in the north Atlantic Ocean in the early 1970s and, when it was mapped, was discovered to stretch a distance roughly the equivalent of Cuba to Virginia. Then, in 2010, Yahoo Green reported that another trash gyre was spotted in the Indian Ocean.

Now, a fourth garbage patch can join these and become a symbol of ocean pollution. The new patch, discovered in the South Pacific, could be 1.5 times larger than Texas, or more than two times the size of California.

Rather appropriately, this new garbage patch was confirmed by Charles Moore, the same man who began to raise awareness of the Great Pacific Garbage patch, when, about 20 years ago, he sailed into it during a yacht race. "We discovered tremendous quantities of plastic. My initial impression is that our samples compared to what we were seeing in the North Pacific in 2007, so it's about 10 years behind," he told ResearchGate.

Moore and his team weren't the first to come across this mass of trash, however. In 2013, a group of researchers published their findings about trash collecting in the area, but, as the lead researcher told ResearchGate, "At that time I saw very little debris."

It isn't that the group from the 2013 study didn't do a thorough enough job, but that the ocean and plastic pollution are fickle things to research. As Moore explained, one trawl may go through a less concentrated area and not pick up much of anything, while another will hit a plastic trash mother lode.

It's important not to imagine a floating island of trash. The vast majority of the plastic is broken down into tiny, smaller-than-rice-sized specks. "We found a few larger items, occasionally a buoy and some fishing gear, but most of it was broken into bits," said Moore. He likens the debris in the ocean to a "smog" that extends both up to the ocean's surface and into its depths.

Moore and his team returned from their expedition in early May, so they're still cleaning and processing samples for closer study. It'll be some time before there's anything ready for publication, but Moore thought it important to start discussing the initial impressions now, especially as the South Pacific is a less-explored part of the ocean.

"There's a sense of urgency to get information out about this area, because it's being destroyed at an enormously accelerated rate. For much of the unexplored ocean, we will never have pre-plastic baseline data."

Editor's note: This story was originally published in August 2010 and has been updated with new information.

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