

Plastic pollution in the ocean affects even the tiniest of creatures

By Adam Vaughan, The Guardian, adapted by Newsela staff on 09.21.16

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In this Wednesday, May 19, 2010, photo, a blue rectangular piece of microplastic is visible on the finger of Julie Masura, a researcher with the University of Washington-Tacoma environmental science program, as Masura examines debris from a collection filter that was pulled through the Thea Foss Waterway in Tacoma, Washington. AP Photo/Ted S. Warren

Scientists are worried about what small pieces of plastics, called microplastics, are doing to the oceans' tiniest creatures, zooplankton. They will travel across the Atlantic Ocean to study the problem.

Zooplankton, small oceanic animals, are important for the sea's food web. They feed fish who feed other fish, right up to the fish we eat. Without them, these fish would starve.

Still, scientists are not sure how bad the pollution has become in the wild. A group of scientists will leave England on Tuesday. They will travel around the Atlantic Ocean to see how common it is to find microplastics in wild zooplankton.

Microplastics Are Bad For Zooplankton

Madeleine Steer is a scientist at Plymouth University in England who will be part of the voyage. She described the side effects zooplankton suffer after eating microplastics. They die earlier and have trouble reproducing. Sometimes, they might even change how they act and become easier to kill. "Basically it's not good for them, they're going to die," she said.

She added that people have not studied how microplastics affect zooplankton in the wild. She said there have been studies on what microplastics do to some sea creatures, but not the bottom of the food chain.

Steer will wake up at four in the morning. She will spend 12 hours putting down nets to catch as much zooplankton as possible. Steer has to start early because more zooplankton come to the surface when it is dark. At night, they are less likely to be eaten by predators.

Microbeads Have Been Banned

In the Atlantic Ocean, the currents meet and circle around in the center in the north and south. Plastic is caught in the currents and gets stuck in these circles. Steer noted that because of the countries on either side of the ocean, it was already "quite polluted."

More and more people are concerned about microplastics. The government in the United Kingdom followed the American government earlier this month when it said it would not let people use microbeads, a kind of microplastic. These are found in household products like face scrubs.

Steer says the United Kingdom is off to a good start. However, stopping the use of microbeads would not address bigger problems of plastic pollution at sea. They have not done anything about microfibers in clothing, for example. Steer says these are more common than microplastics in the ocean.

Scientists will travel up to 600 miles a day on the British Antarctic Survey boat.