

Travel Opinion

Plastic colonialism: ‘A stream of plastic debris, stretching miles, is heading towards us’

We may have placed it with good intention in our recycling bins, but it is choking villages, rivers and seas on the other side of the world



A beach filled with plastic waste in Banda Aceh, Indonesia, after floods brought rubbish from residential areas to the sea. Photograph: Hotli Simanjuntak/EPA

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We drop anchor in the Indonesian port town of Kupang on the island of Timor. In six years spent at sea circumnavigating, these are the most polluted waters we’ve ever sailed in. A stream of plastic debris, stretching for miles, is heading towards us: noodle wrappers, a garden chair and bin bags full of more plastic glide by.

Beaches are speckled with colours and textures that don’t belong. Comprising of more than 17,000 islands, [Indonesia](#) is a developing country without, in places, comprehensive waste – management systems or recycling infrastructure yet. The oversupply of single-use plastic by producers coupled with the tonnes of banned illegal plastic waste smuggled in by developed countries is killing the ecosystems here.

We hop into our dinghy to go ashore. Slamming over waves, we swerve to prevent a bundle of soiled nappies from becoming tangled in our propeller. At the water's edge a used sanitary pad floats by while an old phone battery twinkles in the sandy shallows.

[[There is something delusional about your frantic trips to the recycling bin](#)]

By taxi, we journey inland. Plastic waste is piled up along dusty roads. Rolls of sachets containing everything from sweets to shampoo, hang conveniently from street vendors' stalls. Here, where the median wage is equivalent to under €200 a month, producers target users with single portions that are perceived as more affordable.

Even if this country were more developed, globally only an estimated 9 per cent of plastic ever produced has been recycled. The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) predicts that without stronger policies, [plastic production will increase by 70 per cent by 2040 from where it was in 2020](#).

In Ireland, [we're the largest producer of plastic packaging waste in the EU](#) per head for the ninth year running. As a wealthy country our recycling capability began when Repak was formed in 1997, but in 2022 we only managed to recycle [6 per cent of plastic packaging waste domestically](#). We mostly incinerated the rest, but sent 26 per cent to the UK, the EU and a number of developing countries. The [EU and UK then re-export a large share of this type of waste to poorer countries](#) including Indonesia.

Continuing our journey west, we reach the islands of the Komodo national park. Safely anchored, we grab our masks and flippers and dive in. Thriving corals carpet the anchorage. A manta ray passes by effortlessly while several green sea turtles sit on the bottom chewing sea grass.

On the seabed running parallel to the beach, a regular pattern the size of an Olympic swimming pool catches my eye. I freedive down to see thousands of plastic cups. In the weeks that follow I notice them everywhere with their plastic film lid and a straw covered in plastic wrap.

By November, it's rainy season and we're in Lombok. Heavy downpours wash rubbish from villages into rivers that carry it to the sea. Patches of water in our anchorage becomes thickly covered with white blobs of styrofoam, sachets, bags and

indecipherable fragments of plastic breaking down into microplastics.



Kate Ashe-Leonard with plastic packaging debris

We hike to the local market passing children as they play along the shoreline, their footsteps crunch through the tide of plastic washed up there. At the market are smiling faces, a mud floor, tarpaulin roof and pungent metallic fish-filled buckets.



A study commissioned by the WWF conservation organisation estimated that humans could be ingesting about five grammes of plastic a week – perhaps the equivalent weight of a credit card. It isn't fair that the number could be much higher for villagers here.

Since [China](#) banned imports of foreign waste in 2018, top exporters, including the EU and UK, have [diverted an even larger proportion of theirs to southeast Asian countries](#). To stem this flow, a year later, the export of hazardous waste to non-OECD countries such as Indonesia was [made illegal via the Basel Convention Ban Amendment](#).

Since then, though, waste trafficking hasn't ceased. In one case in 2020, a total of 100 containers of hazardous waste was found abandoned in a southeast Asian port of transit.

Waste companies are managing to exploit loopholes in regulations between source and recipient countries with unharmonised laws. Banned imports of mixed plastic, often with the involvement of criminal waste traffickers, is also sometimes concealed within otherwise legitimate non-hazardous waste shipments such as paper.

Picked through by the villagers whose priority is putting food on the table over longer-term health or environmental concerns, it's then sold as fuel to factories while the remainder gets burned or dumped.

That which makes it to landfill exceeds capacity intended for domestic trash. Without the infrastructure to cope and robust mechanisms to properly audit incoming shipments, exporting plastic to developing countries is a form of waste colonialism.

By May 2027, new EU rules will ban the export of non-hazardous waste such as paper to non-OECD countries. However, those recipient countries can still apply for exemption [if they demonstrate their ability to process the waste in a safe way](#).

While difficult to enforce, even if successful, the problem continues to pour in from developed countries outside the EU such as the US and [Australia](#).

But the plastic crisis is more about overproduction than waste management. While interventions to control the flow of plastic waste are necessary, they only deal with the problem after it is too late and the plastic is already in the world.

The deluge of plastics being heaped upon Indonesia surely constitutes a crime against humanity, enacted by the producers of fossil fuels and plastics and the governments who facilitate them.



The problems this creates will affect us all and, as consumers, we need to hold brands accountable for packaging products in sustainable material, suitable for the market in which it is sold.

It is possible that some of the plastic waste choking the villages, rivers and seas here may have been placed, with the best of intentions, by you in your recycling bin.

Kate Ashe-Leonard left Ireland in 2017 to live with her partner in London. The following year they began sailing around the world. They have lived off rental income from their home in London and working remotely. Instagram: [sv polaris](#) Blog: [svpolaris.com](#)