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# A TIDE OF CONCERN

BY BRYAN ELLISON



Image: Adobe Stock.

In June of 2021, I found myself in what should have been a paradise. My friends and I had recently turned 30 and we celebrated by flying out to Tulum, Mexico to dive some of the famed cenotes. Tulum is about an hour and a half south of Cancun; a tropical area surrounded by jungle, where the air is so thick and wet that each step feels like you're pushing through layers of humidity. Many plant species in Mexico have evolved to thrive in these conditions, and the humidity here contributes to rich biodiversity in the area.

The beaches around the resorts are in pristine condition as well. For much of the year, unsightly and smelly seaweed washes ashore, causing an eyesore and a stink on the beach. The resorts remove this seaweed to beautify the area and keep tourists coming back.

Just outside of the resorts, however, the sights and sentiments of paradise are obliterated. South of Tulum is a road that connects down to an extremely remote fishing village called Punta Allen. This road runs along what is known as Sian Ka'an Biosphere Reserve: 2,300 square miles of UNESCO-protected land. My friends and I drove this way just to ex-

plore. This area is so far removed from civilization that it should be immaculate and void of any reminders of humanity. Instead, the entire 33 miles of beach in this "protected land" is littered with trash, most of it plastic, in a wall about five feet wide and two feet tall. Fishing ropes, bottles, and ice chests are just some of the items that can be found.

While the local government tries to keep this hidden, it's not exactly a secret. A simple Google search will bring up articles about pollution and greenwashing in Tulum. And while the garbage is on Mexico's beaches, they're not the main culprit for all of this trash. Much of it is discarded or lost fishing gear off boats from other countries, and an even greater percentage of it is trash carried there in marine currents from all over the Pacific. I remember seeing trash from the United States, Korea, Japan, and some with Arabic writing on it. Standing in what appeared to be Eden destroyed, I couldn't help but wonder who should be responsible for cleaning this mess up?

Max Liboiron wrote a book called *Pollution is Colonialism* where they argue that pollution is more than just a symptom of capitalism, but a brutal and

aggressive theft of indigenous land, and I think they are absolutely right. At that moment I felt shame and guilt for being a tourist because I was now directly exploiting this area. I was witnessing the consequences of a cycle of endless consumption that I had spent my entire life living in and benefitting from and was now facing this otherwise beautiful landscape ruined by a world that values profits over people. It made me feel both angry and helpless, while also lifting the veil I had been seeing the world through.

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For the first time, I was shown and understood the powerful destruction that a capitalist society leaves in its wake. I felt angry this Eden had been tarnished by greed, guilty for participating in the behavior that caused this trash, and helpless because this problem is far too massive and complex for any one person or even nation to fix. Liboiron writes in his book that because environ-



Image: "Whale of a Problem"

by Phillipines Greenpeace, rubbish & plastic waste, life-size, 2017

mental science is predominantly viewed through a colonial lens, even the most well-intentioned scientists have difficulty avoiding contributing to the inevitable cultural destruction caused by their work. This plastic doesn't just affect people either: 90% of studies on albatross carcasses reveal plastic debris in their stomachs, even in the chicks. Plastic pollution has become part of the environment virtually everywhere on the planet, including the deepest parts of the Marianas Trench that have never seen sunlight, and experts predict that by 2050, there will be more plastic in the ocean than fish.

## “ The responsibility lies on all of us as we all worked and participated in the mechanisms that got us here in the first place.

Thinking back on who's responsibility it is to clean up this trash, there's no simple solution. The responsibility lies on all of us as we all worked and participated in the mechanisms that got us here in the first place. But this is just one area, and the world is literally littered with places just like this one, not to mention the Pacific garbage patches that much of this particular trash likely came from.

Moving away from single-use plastics (SUPs) would help reduce pollution as they make up about 30% of all plastics consumed. In 2019, China produced over 25 metric tons of SUPs while the United States produced over 17 metric tons. The only solution is to reduce consumption and be mindful about how we create and dispose of any alternatives that come along. While the actions of one person may feel insignificant, individual actions collectively make a significant difference in addressing plastic pollution. By adopting sustainable practices and encouraging others to do the same, contributing to a healthier planet is manageable on the individual level.

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**Image:** Plastic containers recovered from the coast of Tulum. By Augustina Grasso.