

To Kill A Seabird

When you think about animals we should be saving from plastic, what do you think of? Most people will probably say cute dolphins or playful seals, but what about the seabirds? Per year, more seabirds die than marine animals from plastic-related deaths, the numbers are: 100 thousand sea creatures die from this fate per year to one **million** seabirds. Today, this article will shine a light on *why* the seabirds need to be saved from their most prolific killer: plastic.

New Zealand has the most seabirds in the entire world. Unfortunately we also have the highest rate of seabirds dying from plastic pollution. Out of the 9,000 bird species worldwide, only 360 of them are seabirds. Seabirds are more likely to eat plastic because there is a lot of plastic in the ocean, and they often mistake it for food. They swoop down and gobble up floating bottle tops or plastic bags, and because plastic clogs up their stomachs, they then starve to death. According to new research from *Forest And Bird*, on New Zealand beaches, 78% of the rubbish is plastic this is why seabirds, who are unable to differentiate plastic from food, have so much litter in their stomachs. In 1960, the amount of seabirds that were affected by plastic was less than 5%. In 1980, it jumped to 80%, and now in 2018, over 90% of seabirds around the globe have plastic in their stomachs.

Also, when a parent bird has eaten plastic, they fly back to their young and feed them with the plastic, and in most cases, the young have more plastic in their stomachs than adults. Some of the plastic in a bird's stomach can be from up to a hundred years ago, and may have been eaten by several different seabirds. This is because when a bird has eaten plastic it clogs up their stomach, and they starve to death. Once the bird has died it decays, but the plastic it consumed doesn't decay,

so it drifts back into the ocean to be eaten by another seabird.

Imagine eating what you think is food but the more you eat, the more you starve.



Photo taken by Ella, Ruby and Jessica, on the South New Brighton Estuary

With global pollution doubling every 11 years, we have to think about a solution, and fast. At South New Brighton School, our enviro group has been given \$500 to create an environmental project at the New Brighton Estuary. We have called it “Project Birds of the Coast”, where our aim is to get people to respect and connect with the birds that live in and around our estuary. We are planning to put signs up to educate people about the birds, and to build a bird-watching hut.

As well as this, our class, Waka Whakawhiti, made beeswax wraps and sandwich bags, all of which are made of sustainable materials. SNBS advocated for Sustain New Brighton, and together we did a major estuary cleanup on the 8th of July. To advertise this clean up, Ella, one of the writers of this article, directed a script for a Facebook video in which the other two writers starred in. The 70 people who helped with the clean up collected, in total, about half a tonne of rubbish. This was only from the domain and the section of the estuary which borders the school. Unfortunately, it is estimated that 100 million tonnes of plastic debris is in our oceans, so we barely dented the surface of this litter problem.

We recently emailed Forest and Bird, asking how they plan to help the plastic problem. We wanted to know if anyone at Forest and Bird could tell us anything about how to help the birds and how Forest and Bird is helping to stop the ever-growing problem of plastic.

The next day, we saw a reply. The email stated the best way to stop killing the birds is to reduce single-use plastics. They said: “One practical thing Forest & Bird is doing to help with this is that we will be starting to send our *Forest & Bird* and *Wild Things* magazines out in paper envelopes later this year, instead of plastic wrap.”

They then told us about their ‘Kiwi Conservation Club’, which is a club that kids can join, and that they are sharing information about circular economies (which is making something that you can reuse) “About big companies that are doing this already in NZ and how we can help them do it more, and setting a waste minimisation challenge for schools and families.”

Being humans, we always look for the easiest ways to dispose of things. However, the easiest way is not always what we think, for example: right now, people are going to the supermarket and using plastic bags instead of sustainable bags. When they do this, they don’t really have a clear understanding of what the long term effect this will have on the environment. All they are thinking about is that it’s easier to use a plastic bag that will be thrown away after being used once, rather than purchasing or making a bag out of sustainable materials and getting it out when it’s time to go shopping. If we always choose the easiest way, nothing will be done right, and the plastic problem will just get worse.

Earlier this month, Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern announced a ban on plastic bags, this seems to be our first significant step along the sustainability path. In the near future, who knows what's going to be the next to go? Single-use plastics? Or perhaps plastics altogether? We can only wait and see. However, there is one thing we do know, which is that the seabird numbers will slowly begin rising again, and soon, fewer seabirds will have plastic in their stomachs. Let's make sure that this happens. **Mā te tini, mā mano, ka rapa te whai.** *By many, by thousands, the work will be accomplished.*

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Links:

<https://disconnectedlandscapes.wordpress.com/2014/07/03/1-million-birds-and-100000-marine-animals-die-each-year-from-ingesting-plastic-bags/>,
<https://teara.govt.nz/en/seabirds-overview/page-1>,
<https://www.blastic.eu/knowledge-bank/impacts/plastic-ingestion/birds/>,
<https://www.forestandbird.org.nz/campaigns/plastic-pledge>.