



CTA-039-Ocean Plastic-Pacific

How do we save coral reefs?

Vic Ferguson

The World Federation for Coral Reef Conservation 281.971.7703 P.O. Box 311117 Houston Texas 77231



Tern Island. (Photo: France Lanting/Getty Images)

Ocean plastic and toxic waste left behind by the military threaten sea turtles, seals, and other marine life.

September 12, 2014 By [Taylor Hill](#)

Taylor Hill is TakePart's associate environment and wildlife editor.

Hawaiian green sea turtles, monk seals, and black-footed albatrosses are all closer to getting a cleaner, plastic-free home as the federal government takes a step toward declaring a remote Pacific atoll a Superfund site.

The designation, which the United States Environmental Protection Agency gives areas severely contaminated by hazardous waste, would be the first granted for a site that was investigated for ocean plastic pollution.



CTA-039-Ocean Plastic-Pacific

How do we save coral reefs?

Vic Ferguson

The World Federation for Coral Reef Conservation 281.971.7703 P.O. Box 311117 Houston Texas 77231

"I'm thrilled the EPA is taking this historic first step to protect Hawaiian monk seals and green sea turtles from dangerous plastic litter," said Emily Jeffers, an attorney for the Center for Biological Diversity. "These animals face enough threats to their survival from sea level rise and habitat loss; the last thing they need is to choke on a floating plastic bag."

Located about 564 miles northwest of Honolulu, Tern Island is as remote as an island can get. But the atoll is directly in the [path of the Great Pacific Garbage Patch](#), catching bits of the billions of pounds of swirling plastic that inundates the area.

That plastic—whether bags, fishing lines, or bottle caps—often ends up in the bellies of marine animals and birds.

"Initial studies conducted by EPA in areas outside of the Northwestern Hawaiian Islands indicate that microplastic marine debris can accumulate and transport contaminants in the marine environment into the food chain," Dean Higuchi, an EPA spokesman, said in an email.

Higuchi pointed out that the Superfund designation wouldn't come just because of drifting plastic. "The major thing to remember...is the contamination that was left from the military activities on Tern Island," he said.

From 1942 to 1979, the U.S. Navy used the island as an airfield, a missile range, and an aircraft refueling station. The Coast Guard also maintained a facility there.

What did they leave behind? An abandoned airstrip and a landfill filled with generators, electronics, cable, batteries, wires, and a 50,000-gallon neoprene fuel tank.

The government's [initial assessment](#) found toxic substances such as polychlorinated biphenyls and lead in the buried military waste and determined that further action was warranted.

"At this point, no decision has been made on exactly what the next steps will be in designating the site as a Superfund, but the focus will really be on the PCBs and the lead from military activities," Higuchi said. "Plastics were also looked at because the petition asked them to be reviewed, but as of now, it's not considered a hazardous substance in and of itself."

The Center for Biological Diversity, a Tucson, Ariz.-based nonprofit, [petitioned the EPA to conduct the initial study in 2012](#). While the environmental group asked the EPA to look at plastic pollution in the entire Great Pacific Garbage Patch, the government agency limited the research to Tern Island.



CTA-039-Ocean Plastic-Pacific

How do we save coral reefs?

Vic Ferguson

The World Federation for Coral Reef Conservation 281.971.7703 P.O. Box 311117 Houston Texas 77231



Ocean Plastic Pollution Costs \$13 Billion a Year, and Your Face Scrub Is Part of the Problem

"I think the EPA is using Tern Island as a test case to better understand the dangers posed to wildlife by plastic and microplastic pollution," Jeffers said. "We wrote this petition in an attempt to come up with creative ways to address the problem—we know that we can't possibly designate all the areas heavily affected by plastic pollution as Superfund sites, but hopefully the EPA's actions will draw more attention to the problem."

With the ball rolling at Tern Island, are other plastic-polluted sites candidates for Superfund listing? Not yet, says Higuchi, but this could be the start of a new wave of cleanup efforts.

"There are likely many other areas, not only in the U.S., but worldwide, where plastic pollution presents a hazard to the marine ecosystem, the food chain, and potentially to human health," Higuchi said.

*Vic Ferguson
The World Federation for Coral Reef Conservation
Executive Director/Founder
P.O. Box 311117
Houston, Texas 77231
vic.ferguson@wfcrc.org
www.wfcrc.org
281.971.7703 (office)
281.309.1201 (cell)*

"The only thing necessary for the triumph of evil is that good men do nothing"....Edmund Burke