

Plastic found in fish could end up in food chain

By Tony Barboza, Los Angeles Times

Southern California researchers found plastic in nearly 1 in 10 small fish collected in the Pacific Ocean in the latest study to call attention to floating marine debris entering the food chain.

The study published this week by scientists at the Scripps Institution of Oceanography at UC San Diego estimated that fish in the middle depths of the northern Pacific Ocean are ingesting as much as 24,000 tons of plastic each year.

Although the research found a lower percentage of plastic-fouled fish than previous studies, it is the latest to quantify how many fish are eating marine garbage – most of it confetti-sized flecks of discarded plastic – that has accumulated in vast, slow-moving ocean currents known as gyres.

The results came from a 2009 voyage a group of graduate students made to the so-called Pacific Garbage Patch, an area with a high concentration of fragments of floating garbage about 1,000 miles off the California coast. Researchers cast nets into the water and collected 141 fish, mostly lanternfish measuring just a few inches, and took them to a laboratory in San Diego to dissect.

Scientists found plastic debris in 9.2 percent of their stomachs, much of it broken down into multicolored fragments smaller than a human fingernail. However, they believe the actual proportion of fish that have consumed plastic is significantly higher.

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