

Exfoliants are a serious environmental hazard

By Mary Catherine O'Connor, Outside

In 2012, advocacy group 5 Gyres, which draws attention to the epidemic of ocean trash and the impact photo-degraded plastic is having on ocean ecosystems, turned its attention to the Great Lakes. Suddenly, the group's workload skyrocketed.

"We found high concentrations of micro-plastics, more than most ocean samples collected worldwide," said 5 Gyres' executive director Marcus Eriksen. "These were of similar size, shape, texture and composition to plastic microbeads found in many consumer products used as exfoliants..."

Thus began the group's campaign to pressure cosmetics companies to jettison these tiny beads from their products, such as facial scrubs and other types of soaps and toothpaste. The campaign saw some victories, but they were small, says 5 Gyres director of communications Stiv Wilson: "The only firm commitment we got was from Unilever, which said it would cut microbeads out by 2015. Some other companies still have not given a firm deadline. Procter & Gamble said it would eliminate them by end of 2017, but it's all based on when they can find alternatives. Johnson & Johnson has never given a timeline. Long story short, these timelines became a moving target."

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