

**Climate Forward*****Guess What? More Plastic Trash.***

Industry figures show record production in 2021, and almost none of that plastic is getting recycled.



By Somini Sengupta

Feb. 7, 2023

**You're reading the Climate Forward newsletter, for Times subscribers only.** Your must-read guide to the climate crisis. [Get it in your inbox.](#)

When Exxon Mobil announced a record \$56 billion annual profits last week, it noted that the company had established “one of the largest advanced recycling facilities in North America, capable of processing more than 80 million pounds of plastic waste per year.”

That seems like a lot of recycling muscle, except when you consider another figure. The company produced an estimated 6 million metric tons, or 13.2 billion pounds, of polymers used to make plastic in 2021 alone. That is an estimate from a report published by the Minderoo Foundation, set up by the Australian mining magnate Andrew Forrest. Minderoo tracks plastic waste and campaigns against it.

Exxon is the largest producer of virgin polymers, which are derived from petrochemicals and used in plastic. The second largest is a Chinese company called Sinopec.

Asked for comment on the Minderoo report, an Exxon spokeswoman said that “plastics play a vital role in everyday life” and that the company is trying to scale up recycling. “By working with others in industry, governments, communities and consumers, we are helping expand recycling programs so that more plastic waste is transformed into valuable products rather than ending up in landfills.”

**Despite consumer concern, we are trashing more and more plastic.**

Plastics production continued to grow, according to industry data. So did plastic trash: 139 million metric tons in 2021, more than ever before. That's a lot, especially considering that plastic entered our everyday lives after World War II. They're so pervasive that when one reporter tried to spend a day living without plastic, it yielded this delightfully absurd essay.

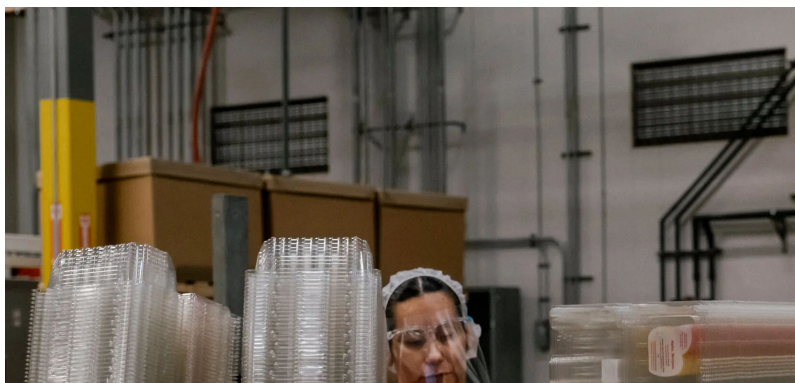
Almost all of that 139 million metric tons of plastic is made from “virgin” petroleum products that have never been used or processed before. Barely 2 percent gets recycled, Minderoo researchers estimated.

**Plastic waste is more than a local environmental pollutant.**

It clogs streams. It chokes turtles. It gets caught on a bare branch and blows in the breeze. It stews in landfills.

But it is also a climate pollutant. From the extraction of fossil fuels to make polymers to the transport and disposal of the waste, single-use plastics produced 450 million metric tons of planet-warming greenhouse gases in 2021 alone, according to estimates by Minderoo, or just below the annual emissions of Britain.

Minderoo is pressing for levies on “fossil-fuel polymer production and/or consumption” to fund the collection and recycling of plastic waste.





**What about those triangles and**

They're deceptive. Many of us a triangle has a number within. N never. (California banned the us

Rigid plastics are more likely to

Some of the worst kinds of plast sachets for shampoos and creat

Here's our guide from last year, handling plastic waste.

recycling bins. Not so. Each s 3-7, it's sometimes, rarely or

global south, like tiny, low-priced

outside the United States are

**And the plastic bag bans?**

There have been many such bag bans in recent years. Among the unexpected consequences: They seem to lead to an increase in plastic trash bags.

**We're keeping an eye on negotiations for a global plastics treaty.**

This is the battleground where plastic producers, environmentalists and negotiators from every country are hammering out what is intended to be a global agreement to deal with plastic waste.

The big tension is between environmental campaigners who want to curb the production of polymers, the raw goods that go into plastic, and industry groups that want to focus on how to better collect and recycle plastic.

At negotiations in Uruguay in December, the United States advocated for an accord like the Paris climate agreement under which countries would set their own national voluntary targets and plans. Others, including the European Union, want mandatory global regulations for every country and company to abide by.

The next round of negotiations are in May. We'll keep you posted.

**Essential news from The Times**



Aidan Colton, an atmospheric technician with NOAA, collected an air sample atop Mauna Kea in Hawaii. Erin Schaff/The New York Times

**Lava, snow and science:** An eruption in Hawaii briefly halted long-running climate research, but scientists found a way to carry on. They moved to a neighboring volcano.

**A warship's demise:** The Brazilian Navy said it had begun an operation to send the aircraft carrier São Paulo, packed with asbestos, to the bottom of the Atlantic.

**Bad news for bears:** The Biden administration is taking a step toward lifting protections for some grizzlies. It could open the door to hunting in Montana, Wyoming and Idaho.

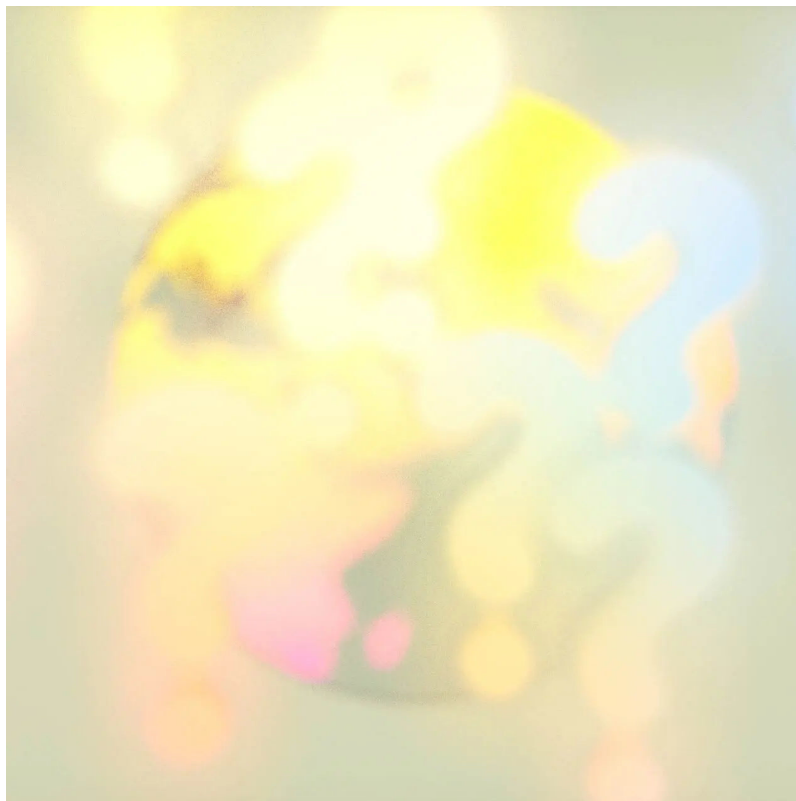
**A Canadian quarrel:** The Ontario provincial government has opened up parts of the greenbelt around Toronto for the construction of 50,000 new homes. Some locals aren't happy.

**How to spy on a radical group:** A literary agent struck a book deal with the spokesman for the Earth Liberation Front. Literature was the least of his concerns.

---

## From outside The Times

- According to Axios, sales of plant-based meats are collapsing and companies that make them are in trouble.
- Reuters reported on deadly forest fires in Chile.
- The United Arab Emirates chose an oil executive to lead the next global climate summit. Now The Guardian is reporting that officials are giving oil workers other roles, too.
- From E&E News: President Biden has appointed a climate scientist to help evaluate the effectiveness of the country's intelligence work.
- National Geographic interviewed former poachers of scarlet macaws in Honduras about why they decided to protect the birds instead.
- A short documentary from Scientific American shows why some scientists believe plants domesticated us, not the other way around.
- Carbon brief explained how Britain transformed its electricity supply in just a decade.



Maria Chimishkyan

**Before you go: So many questions. We've got answers.**

A few months ago we invited readers to ask us their questions about climate change, and you sent in more than 1,000 responses. Wondering what we did with all those questions? We used them to build an interactive F.A.Q. feature that lets you type in queries about climate change, in your own words, and get answers written by The Times's climate reporters and editors. Please give it a try.

---

**We goofed:** The Friday newsletter misstated the name of an advocacy group. It is Rewiring America, not Rewriting America.

---

**Thanks for being a subscriber. We'll be back on Friday.**

Manuela Andreoni, Claire O'Neill and Douglas Alteen contributed to Climate Forward. Read past editions of the newsletter here.

If you're enjoying what you're reading, please consider recommending it to others. They can sign up here. Browse all of our subscriber-only newsletters here.

Reach us at [climateforward@nytimes.com](mailto:climateforward@nytimes.com). We read every message, and reply to many!

