

[Previous Story](#)[Next Story](#)

13 Feb 2015 | Hindustan Times (Mumbai) | Snehal Rebello snehal.rebello@hindustantimes.com

India one of top countries that sends plastic waste into sea

MUMBAI: The country with its 7,500km coastline has emerged among the top 20 coastal populations in the world that sends plastic debris into the ocean, a study by seven US-based research institutes has revealed.

And if India does not manage its plastic waste, in a decade it will be among the top five contributors of marine pollution.

Estimating for the first time the amount of plastic generated from people living within 50km of the coastline that enters the oceans in a given year for 192 coastal nations, it's not as much as the quantum of plastic debris that directly goes into the sea from India, as much as the mismanaged plastic waste. Mismanaged plastic waste is inadequately managed waste plus 2% litter.

The eight-member team found that for 187.5 million coastal population in 2010 in India, the quantum of mismanaged waste generated was 0.60 million metric tonnes (MT) a year.

And, while the population will go up by 18.7% in 2025, the mismanaged waste will increase four times to 2.88 MT a year.

"We considered landfills in low-income countries and all dumps to be inadequately managed," stated the paper. "Some percentage of the total mismanaged plastic waste enters the ocean and becomes marine debris."

The finding assumes significance because plastic debris has an impact on oceans, wildlife, and, potentially, humans through the food chain. "Weathering of plastic debris causes fragmentation into particles that even small marine invertebrates may ingest," stated the study.

Globally, 275 MT of plastic waste was generated in 192 coastal countries in 2010, with 4.8 to 12.7 MT entering the ocean. "Our estimate of 8 million metric tonnes going into the oceans in 2010 is equivalent to five grocery bags filled with plastic for every foot of coastline in the world," said Jenna Jambeck, an assistant professor of environmental engineering at University of Georgia and the study's lead author. "Our estimate for 2015 is about 9.1 million metric tons."

Jambeck said, "In 2025, the annual input will be about 10 bags full of plastic per foot of coastline."

The study found the percentage of mismanaged waste from a low middle-income country like India was as high at 87%, as compared to low income neighbouring countries such as Bangladesh and Burma that stood at 88%. China, an upper middle-income country, generates the highest mismanaged waste at 8.82 MT a year, while US, a high-income country generates the lowest (0.28 MT).

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[Previous Story](#)[Next Story](#)

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