



Fidra
25 Westgate
North Berwick
EH39 4AG

Tel: 01620 895677
Email: info@fidra.org.uk
Web: www.fidra.org.uk

BRIEFING SHEET

COTTON BUDS: A MARINE LITTER ISSUE

Plastic cotton bud stems disposed of into sewage systems have resulted in pollution of inland waterways and the marine environment. Despite having been recognized as a problem for at least 20 years, this continues to be a pollution issue worldwide. In the UK, plastic cotton bud stems constitute more than 50% of sewage related debris recorded in surveys of UK beaches in recent years, and huge numbers are found on beaches across Europe.



WHY IS THIS A PROBLEM?



Plastic cotton bud stems, Dumfries and Galloway (C Cavers)

A common item of plastic marine litter, cotton buds are not only aesthetically undesirable on beaches, but also pose a potential health threat both to the public and to marine life. Plastics in the marine environment accumulate a mixture of chemical contaminants from the surrounding seawater, including flame retardants, pesticides and metals. These present a potential health risk to the public through physical contact on recreational beaches and associated bathing waters. Living organisms in the coastal and marine environments are also threatened through ingestion of plastic debris. The risk of plastic debris to animals through ingestion is well

documented, and cotton buds specifically have been found in the digestive systems of seabirds and turtles. In some cases, these have been directly responsible for the death of the animal involved, through damage to internal organs. Ingested plastic could also lead to bioaccumulation of toxic chemicals in the bodies of marine animals, and starvation, as it persists in the gut and interferes with the animals' normal digestive processes.

SOLUTIONS SO FAR (UK)

Previous drives to solve the problem resulted in the widespread use of logos on cotton bud packaging such as 'Bag it and bin it, don't flush it', with accompanying publicity campaigns. Although they initially led to a decrease in numbers of plastic cotton buds on UK beaches, the latest figures from the Marine Conservation Society beach cleans are the highest for 10 years, suggesting efforts to change behaviour do not work in the long term. Sewage systems are under pressure on a national scale, with 31,000 combined sewage overflows presenting the potential for raw sewage spills into the sea through blockages and storm events which overload them. Despite extensive investment programmes, it is not financially or logistically feasible for water companies to directly address this issue. The ubiquitous presence of buds on beaches across Europe and further afield shows that similar problems exist internationally.



Cotton bud stems collected in Denmark. (R. Metcalfe, KIMO)

THE FINAL ANSWER

An alternative, relatively simple solution to the issue of plastic cotton buds in marine litter is to replace the plastic sticks with alternative materials which are biodegradable, such as paper (from FSC certified sources if possible). Since 2013, The Cotton Bud Project has approached retailers and manufacturers to propose this solution as a proactive measure to protect the marine environment.

John Lewis, The Body Shop, Marks & Spencer, and more recently Johnson & Johnson (EMEA region) and Waitrose have already successfully made the transition. **Commitments to change have been made by Sainsbury's, Tesco, Asda, Wilko, Superdrug, Mothercare, Morrisons, Boots.**

Find out more at www.cottonbudproject.org.uk.

