

Plastic pollution

EIGHT individuals from Europe, Russia and Japan were asked to keep a diary of everything they ate for a small study. After a week, they provided stool samples to scientists. All eight subjects were found to have traces of plastic in their system. Each had had plastic-wrapped food or had drunk from plastic bottles, while six had consumed seafood. It bears repeating — our planet has a plastic problem, and it isn't going away anytime soon. The worldwide production of plastic is said to have swollen to nearly 300m tonnes a year. More than 8m of that ends up in the oceans, where it can take anywhere from 100 to 1,000 years to disintegrate, contaminating beaches, endangering marine life and eventually making its way into the food chain. The survey results may shock some, but it was inevitable that the material found all around us would one day be inside us. Recently, the EU Parliament voted for an outright ban on single-use plastics. With a growing population and rapid urbanisation, Pakistan's demand for cheap plastic will keep increasing. Are policymakers paying attention? Those in the corridors of power should be — particularly since many have stakes in large-scale industries.

A UN report states that the Indus River has the second highest amount of plastic waste dumped into it at 164,332 tonnes. Most of the untreated industrial waste of Lahore, Faisalabad and Sialkot also ends up in the rivers, lakes and sea. Another WWF study mentions that plastic contributes nearly 50pc of the beached pollution at Karachi's Clifton beach, while other beaches along the coastal belt are also getting polluted. The implications for public health are worrying. In the past, there have been several attempts at banning non-biodegradable polythene bags, but these were always resisted by manufacturing industries, which employ thousands of workers. It is said that some 10,000 manufacturing units produce over 50bn plastic bags a year in Pakistan. The Sindh government announced a ban this year (although the law has existed since 2014), but little evidence of its compliance exists on ground, as is evident from the absence of large-scale, inexpensive, environmentally friendly alternatives and the lack of awareness amongst the general population. However, informed consumers can change some of their lifestyle choices by prioritising the environment and health of their fellow citizens over convenience. After all, even in the absence of strict laws, the market still only responds to demand.

Editorial