

In a nutshell

In 2017, I collected every piece of plastic that I threw away. I wanted to analyse the results of this year-long experiment to help the impact of our plastic consumption resonate on an individual level and with everyday people. This process has been integral in shifting my position from being oblivious of my consumption to being able to quantify it piece by piece.

1

Over the course of one year, I threw away **4,490 pieces of plastic**

Based on the weight of this, this is just below average compared to what the rest of the UK consumes and throws away.

2

The UK throws away over **295 billion pieces of plastic every year**

If we applied the amount of plastic waste I collected to every individual in the country, it would mean that the population of the UK throws away 295 billion pieces of plastic every year. In volume, this represents a pile of plastic rubbish big enough to cover Clapham Common and rise as high as The Shard.

3

93% of my collected plastic waste was single-use packaging

Shockingly, 4,177 pieces of plastic were single-use packaging, specifically designed to be thrown away. By simply combining the Oxford English Dictionary definitions for single-use and packaging, we can offer a fresh take on the definition of single-use packaging as 'a material used to wrap or protect goods that is designed to be used once and then disposed of or destroyed'.

4

67% of my throwaway plastic was used to package, wrap and consume food

No surprises here. We can buy food anytime, anywhere and in abundance, especially from supermarkets. And most of it comes wrapped in plastic.

5

47% of the throwaway plastic is made of low grade, low value and unrecyclable plastic film

Almost no piece of packaging made of plastic film can be recycled, yet this makes up the majority of the pieces in my collection of plastic waste. It cannot be made into new plastic nor can it be made from recycled plastic.



6

70% of the plastic that I threw away in a year is **not currently recyclable**

Plastic bottles, trays and pots are widely collected by local councils in the UK, but under a third (30%) of the plastic waste I created is currently recyclable in the UK.

7

Only 10% of my throwaway plastic waste would be collected for recycling

Given that every local authority has a different policy and approach to waste management and recycling, it's unsurprising that much of the recyclable plastic is not collected. The plastic waste ends up in the wrong bin, escapes or spills, or is not recyclable under one council, so it means only about 10% of all the plastic I threw away is actually collected to be recycled.

Only 4% of my collection of plastic waste would be recycled at UK recycling facilities

Of the 4,490 pieces of plastic that I saved over the course of a year, only 161 would be recycled. We define recycled as 'plastic waste that has been converted into reusable materials at facilities in the UK'.

Are we being lied to about recycling? Because clearly, recycling is not enough.

To really make an impact on this urgent situation, governments, industry and retailers need to act now. For example, phasing out plastic film if its unrecyclable, making packaging more reusable and recyclable, and investing in improving recycling infrastructure will make huge leaps towards reducing our plastic footprint in the UK and overseas.

As well as raising our voices to put pressure on policymakers and corporations, each of us needs to acknowledge that we are part of the system, and that each of us has a responsibility too. We need to acknowledge that our throwaway consumer culture has affected the environment and that our love for cheap and superfluous convenience will have irreversible damage on our future.

Less plastic needs to be produced, and less plastic needs to be consumed.