

Pacific garbage patch is far larger than feared: study

80,000 tonnes of trash float as a mass in the ocean

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The vast dump of plastic waste swirling in the Pacific ocean is now bigger than France, Germany and Spain combined – far larger than previously feared – and is growing rapidly, a study published on Thursday warned.

Researchers based in the Netherlands used a fleet of boats and aircraft to scan the immense accumulation of bottles, containers, fishing nets and microparticles known as the “Great Pacific Garbage Patch” (GPGP) and found an astonishing build-up of plastic waste. “We found about 80,000 tonnes of buoyant plastic currently in the GPGP,” said Laurent Lebreton, lead author of the study published in the journal *Scientific Reports*.



File photo of plastic waste in Hanauma Bay, Hawaii.

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That’s around the weight of 500 jumbo jets, and up to sixteen times greater than the plastic mass uncovered there in previous studies.

But what really shocked the team was the amount of plastic pieces that have built up on the marine gyre between Hawaii and California in recent years.

They found that the dump now contains around 1.8 trillion pieces of plastic, posing

a dual threat to marine life. Microplastics, tiny fragments of plastic smaller than 50mm in size that make up the vast majority of items in the GPGP, can enter the food chain when swallowed by fish.

The pollutants they contain become more concentrated as they work their way up through the food web.

“The other environmental impact comes from the larger debris, especially the fishing nets,” said Mr. Lebreton.

These net fragments kill marine life by trapping fish and animals such as turtles in a process known as ‘ghost fishing’. Global plastics production hit 322 million tonnes in 2015, according to the International Organization for Standardization.