

Why Sea Turtles Eat Plastic

Microplastics have been found in every single species of sea turtle, and a new study published in *Current Biology* suggests that smell could be an explanation for that. Plastics in the water become host to multiple organisms, including plankton. Plankton emit large amounts of dimethyl sulfide, which is an organic compound that a number of marine animals rely on to find food. Sea turtles use their keen sense of smell to locate this compound, and that may be leading the turtles to consume more plastics.

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According to Matthew Savoca, a postdoctoral research fellow at Stanford University's Hopkins Marine Station and one of the study's authors...

I've heard numerous times that animals just eat plastic because they don't know any better...What this type of research shows is that there are really complex evolutionary mechanisms that govern how animals are finding food."

CNN

Scientists previously hypothesized that sea turtles consumed plastics because floating bags resembled jellyfish, but that theory doesn't account for their consumption of other plastics. These plastics block the turtles' intestinal tract, negatively impacting digestion, and potentially causing the turtle to go into septic shock.

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Microplastics are a threat to nearly all sea turtle populations, which are listed on the International Union for Conservation of Nature's red list – all but one species of sea

turtles are listed as vulnerable, endangered, or critically endangered.

Sources:

- *Sea Turtles Think Plastic Smells Like Food*
- *Odors from marine plastic debris elicit foraging behavior in sea turtles*
- *Sea Turtles*
- *Depressing Image Shows Dead Baby Sea Turtle Found with 104 Pieces of Plastic in Its Belly*