

## Q&A

Craig Leeson, 50, filmmaker

**Your doco *A Plastic Ocean* – lauded by David Attenborough as “the most important film of our time” – took seven years to make, filming in 20 locations around the world. Did you have any idea it would turn into such an epic? I knew at the start that we had a problem with plastic in our oceans, but the sheer scale of the problem unfolded as we went. We took scientists with us everywhere to verify our findings, which were truly shocking. This stuff is *everywhere* – even in seemingly pristine places like the South Pacific and sub-Antarctic – and it’s a grave threat not just to wildlife but to human health, too.**

**What was the most confronting thing you filmed?** On Lord Howe Island we joined a seabird biologist collecting dozens of dead shearwaters every day. The amount of plastic distending their stomachs – we counted 234 pieces in one bird – was terrible. (They eat it because after years in the ocean, covered in algae and fish eggs, it smells like food.) And I realised I was partly responsible: there were things I’d use, like bottle tops, lighters, golf tees... like everyone, I’d been led to believe plastic is disposable – that if I throw it away, it goes away. But there is no away. Every bit of plastic ever made is still on the planet; it doesn’t biodegrade, and even if it’s burned it’s still around us in the form of furans and dioxins. You just can’t get rid of it.

**And much of it in the oceans is in a form we can’t get to, right?** Yes, as one of the scientists in the film says, “Plastic doesn’t break down, it breaks up.” Over years it disintegrates into ever smaller pieces, eventually becoming a kind of plastic smog. These microplastics are a sponge for free-floating toxins and chemicals, and they’re eaten by plankton – so the toxins travel up through the ocean food chain, and eventually to us.

**“We want to change the world’s attitude towards plastic within a generation,” you’ve said of this film. That’s a big ask. Is it possible?** When we finished filming I was very depressed by what I’d seen. It wasn’t until we started screening that I realised it was absolutely possible. The film has been



No.1 on iTunes and the reaction – from politicians to children to plastics producers – shows we’re opening people’s eyes. All of them want to know, “How do we change this?”

**How do we change it?** Most of the 300 million tonnes of plastic made every year is used just once then thrown away. It’s this single-use stuff that’s the main problem. First we have to stop making and using it, and stop any more from getting into our oceans. That’ll require radical government action as well as a change of attitude and behaviour by individuals.

**Parts of the film, like the world-first shots of the pygmy blue whale, are very beautiful. Why does this work with the harrowing message?** I wanted to make a film that would engage people, so they feel the connection between humanity and the ocean. Without healthy oceans, life on Earth will end.

**You’re from Burnie, Tasmania, but now live in Hong Kong, where you report for Al Jazeera and run your own media company. And you love to surf. Good waves over there?** We’ve got 256 islands, so there are lots of reef breaks, and in summer the typhoons drive up big swells. The surfing scene has really caught on in recent years, so I don’t get funny looks any more. One of my mates was the first guy to surf here and the police used to chase him out of the water!

WE COUNTED  
234 PIECES OF  
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◀ To see a trailer for *A Plastic Ocean*, go to [theaustralian.com.au/magazine](http://theaustralian.com.au/magazine) ▶

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