

Lifting up the blanket of where marine pollution really comes from: the chemical industry

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The oceans are plagued by a number of pressures, one of which is pollution by contaminants such as nutrients, chemicals and plastics. Governing these pollution is complex as the sources, often on land, are disconnected from where they end up in the oceans. Another challenge is the diversity of contaminant sources, spanning individual households and run off from roads to different economic sectors such as petrochemical, food, and other consumer goods production. While these challenges are well-recognized by both academia and policy makers, we argue in this paper that what remains hidden in the vast literature and research into these contaminants, and how their governance is failing, is the role of the chemical industry as the point-source of most marine pollution. Based on a literature review we will show that most research on marine pollution focuses on food brands packaging, agricultural practice and the intentional discharge or ocean spills of petrochemicals as the mains sources of marine contamination. However, these distinctions obscure that all these pollutants stem from the petrochemical industry. Stopping pollution at source thus needs to go beyond the economic sectors that bring these contaminants on the market, and needs to consider the roles and responsibility of the petrochemical industry. Based on this literature review, we will discuss 2 implications from this observation. First, more academic and political attention should be paid to how the petrochemical industry is regulated, is operating and is deflecting transformative action. Second, research and practice in governing marine pollution is currently fragmented across geographies, scale and sector where various types contaminants are governed separately and at varying levels of stringency. Collaboration within academia and policy makers needs to be enhanced and coordinated to develop a preventive approach for ocean pollution.