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Peer reviewed

Review: Plastic Soup: An Atlas of Ocean Pollution

By M.R. Abbing

Reviewed by Yves Laberge

Québec, Canada

Abbing, Michiel Roscam. *Plastic Soup: An Atlas of Ocean Pollution*, Translation by Tessera Translations, Washington, DC: Island Press with The Plastic Soup Foundation, 2019, 124 pp. ISBN: 9781642830088, hardcover, US\$27.00.

We all have seen in the media this horrible agglomeration of floating bottles and plastic waste that invades oceans and beaches; it is sometimes described metaphorically as “plastic soup”. Nowadays, “Plastic soup is everywhere”, writes political scientist Michiel Roscam Abbing in *Plastic Soup: An Atlas of Ocean of Pollution*, and to explain this worrying phenomenon, he argues that “At first glance, plastics seemingly have environmental benefits when compared with other materials” (p. 8). But that simple reasoning comes whenever one only considers — in a short-term perspective — the relatively low material costs of production for plastic, without the long-term, environmental consequences of introducing plastics in countless products, including bags. Paradoxically, micro plastics such as cosmetics “are designed to end up as waste” (p. 14). And consumers, young and old, are a part of that never-ending circle, as explained in this sociological reasoning for explaining the institutional reasons (and logics) behind pollution: “When regulation falls short, competition drives manufacturers to add the cheapest raw material — plastic — and consumers become polluters without realizing it” (p. 15).

Subdivided into ten short but informative sections, *Plastic Soup* could almost be seen by potential readers (and hopefully librarians) as, the “little encyclopedia about the emerging plastic ocean”. In the first half, Abbing intelligently highlights the unforeseen consequences of our everyday lives, taking from a variety of cases and types of plastic.. For example, the washing machine and synthetic fabrics are undoubtedly seen as “two icons of progress” (p. 39); we ought to be clean and therefore wash ourselves and our clothes for obvious hygiene reasons. However, we now must deal with some important and invisible “side effects” that come with the generalization of this process: “While

being washed and dried in a machine, synthetic clothing releases fibers in numbers that are mind-boggling” (p. 39).

Translated from Dutch, this book has an optimistic balance since it allows more room for real solutions than pages about a somber diagnostic that we already know (see section 4 on “Unbalanced ecosystems” and “Toxins in the Food Chain”). Among possible scenarios apart from recycling (p. 82), we find in the last half the “Plastic to Fuel” strategy (p. 85), the idea of using plastic waste “as raw materials for new products” (p. 86), encouraging deposits for all kinds of bottles (p. 112), and of course “educating” (p. 106). Answers to pollution are not just technological but also political; among many strategies exemplified here, we find responsible production for industries and international treaties for the protection of the environment, which can be critical to minimize these global problems (see pp. 122-123). But the real solutions to be promoted firstly on an individual basis are consuming less and making people more aware of the hidden hazards related to (over)consumption and wastage. Prevention is always the key.

Undoubtedly, *Plastic Soup* is an empowering educational tool with maps and figures plus many feasible solutions for all issues related to pollution and waste. However, there are a few quibbles to mention about this very original book that nevertheless seems slightly unfinished. Unfortunately, there are no footnotes and very few bibliographical sources apart from mentions of web sites. And the absence of an index of maps makes the subtitle “Atlas” a little exaggerated; because of these shortcomings, *Plastic Soup* is neither an encyclopedia, nor a reference book, nor a standard atlas. But these problems can hopefully be resolved for a new, updated version. Because of its clear and concise style, Michiel Roscam Abbing’s *Plastic Soup* can surely be useful in high schools and colleges, but it could as well serve in university classes in various disciplines: Environmental Education, Education for Sustainable Development, Environmental Sociology, and even Chemistry. Let’s hope *Plastic Soup* will be translated in more languages. Evidently, Michiel Roscam Abbing knows his field very well, and his instructive book should be made available in public and school libraries.

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