

ADDRESSING BUTTERFLY QUESTIONS: THE PLANET, PLASTIC POLLUTION AND POLICY PATHWAYS AT JAPAN'S G20

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In its fifth year, the 2019 G20 Interfaith Forum gathered outside of Tokyo to discuss an ambitious agenda organized under the triple-P thematic of Peace, People and Planet: Pathways Forward. While each of these broad themes guided discussions both in panels and plenaries, from the Forum's outset it became clear that a reoccurring focus would be the importance of protecting the planet in order to support its people and to promote peace.

The data presented at the Forum's inception plenary was too compelling to ignore: according to multiple speakers, planet degradation has costed approximately \$US11 trillion to date. But beyond the financial aspect, the environmental and ethical considerations that go into evaluating why this is a reality were at the core of the discussions among the Forum's interfaith leaders. This focus instigated a number of compelling "butterfly questions" where participants probed and reflected on the implicit human aspect of environmental degradation. In their discussion, speakers often referenced the postwar tale of former Japanese Emperor Hirohito's lamentation of no longer seeing

butterflies in his imperial garden due to environmental degradation. Taking this issue up with Japan's political leadership at the time, Hirohito instigated the establishment of an environmental program to address pollution in Tokyo, leading to great results and the return of butterflies to his city garden. But in today's multipolar system, responding to the magnitude and pace of the transnational issues of pollution and climate change on a global scale at a time when the multilateral system is [perceived](#) to be eroding seems simultaneously dire, daunting and difficult. And the likelihood of creating an environment where butterflies would like to return seems increasingly fleeting.

A prioritized issue within the G20 environment [theme](#) under Japan is addressing threats to coastal and marine ecosystems and conservation of the ocean environment. It is also at the heart of the [2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development](#) and [Sustainable Development Goal \(SDG\) 14](#): conserve and sustainably use the oceans, seas and marine resources. Following the G20 Interfaith Forum, two critical G20 Summits for addressing butterfly questions related to plastic pollution and the marine environment ensued at the policy-level.

First, the [G20 Environment and Energy Ministerial Summit](#) in Karuizawa, Japan, took place in mid-June and led to the outline of a new, voluntary [framework](#) to address the marine plastic waste issue. The framework calls on G20 countries to share information on policies, plans and measures related to plastic waste reduction at the national level and aspire to identify the best practices for combatting plastic litter discharge into the marine environment. It further encourages international cooperation on how to address the environmental damage resulting from plastic waste in the oceans. Here, exchange on technologies, water treatment and creating environmentally-conscious products and designs is in focus.

Further measures were taken at the [G20 Leaders' Summit](#) in Osaka in late June when Prime Minister Abe Shinzo unveiled the [Osaka Blue](#)

[Ocean Vision](#), which commits to reducing additional marine plastic litter to zero by 2050. The Vision suggests a life-cycle approach that includes reducing the discharge of mismanaged plastic litter by improved waste management and innovative solutions while also recognizing the important role of plastics for society. It was reportedly well-received by the G20 leaders, making it into the final [G20 Osaka Leaders' Declaration](#).

The G20 Leaders were on-board both in terms of the Vision's rhetoric and in practice while in Osaka. The Summit Venue, The Osaka International Exhibition Center (INTEX), implemented a [Plastics Smart Action](#), providing detailed information about how plastics used during the Summit would be [recycled](#) and prohibiting the use of single-use plastic water bottles at the venue. While in Osaka, the G20 leaders sipped from straws made of wood and paper, drank water and coffee from reusable bottles and carried around "Summit bags" made without any plastic content. According to the [2018 United Nations Environment Report](#), Japan is number two in the world for single-use plastic packaging per person—trailing only the United States—and the G20 countries produce half of the world's plastic waste.

The G20 2019 host, Prime Minister Abe, aspires for Japan to be a leader when it comes to reducing global marine plastic trash, not just by bringing awareness to the issue but also by developing biodegradables and other innovations to address this growing challenge. Abe also acknowledges the magnitude of the issue and calls on countries beyond the Group of 20 to participate in reducing plastic waste and its impact on the environment. Recognizing that not all countries have the resources or know-how to addressing plastics pollution, following the announcement of the Osaka Blue Vision, the Government of Japan also launched a national [MARINE Initiative](#), aimed at empowering developing countries to promote waste management, recovery of marine litter, and innovation. The initiative, to be carried out by international organizations and Japanese companies, NGOs and local governments,

involves ODA assistance, human capacity training, and best practices sharing.

Human impact on the environment is not only a timeless, cross-cutting and prioritized theme under Japan's G20 leadership but also a number of other important international gatherings that will take place later in this year, such as the [UN Sustainable Development Goals \(SDGs\) Summit](#) in New York in September, the [Our Ocean Conference](#) in Norway in October and the [COP25](#) to be held in Chile in December. The power in policymaking is often in their pluralities and so having multiple mega-summits where the leaders of the world's largest economies will meet to discuss the environmental issues related to the oceans and their health will allow for further synergy and policy action as butterfly (and fish) questions remain as relevant as ever.

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