

Witness to a Plastic Invasion

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Plastic trash floats in the waters off the Smithsonian's Carrie Bow Cay field station, in Belize.

It blew in for two solid days: a flotilla of plastic forks, soda bottles, rubber gloves, and other refuse. I tried to pick everything up off the beach, but when I turned around, you couldn't tell that I had cleaned at all. When we went out in the boats, we had to go slowly in order to dodge the debris. Eventually the tide came in and swooped it all away.

I was at the [Smithsonian Marine Research Station on Carrie Bow](#), a small island on the southern end of Belize. My colleagues and I discussed where the garbage could be coming from. This area is very remote and the trash was blowing in from the open ocean. Based on the wood and pumice ([volcanic rock that floats](#)) that was mixed in with the plastics, our best guess was that a heavy rainstorm washed the debris into the ocean.

On the way back from a short dive, to collect some data, I approached a mass of plastic floating in the water. I still had plenty of air in my tank and battery time on the video camera, so I dropped into the water and sunk below the debris.

From underneath, it looked like a huge, swirling monster. The bright colors of the plastic were backlit from the sun above. I swam up to the trash slowly and shoved my camera straight into it. Underwater photography is difficult because everything moves: the subject and the shooter. Once I was inside this swirling mass of trash, I concentrated solely on trying to stay steady.

It was only later that I was able to really see what I filmed. I was struck by the contents – all items I personally use at home and mostly plastics. I tried to think of how I could rid my house of plastic. I even contemplated buying a cow (so I would never need to buy another plastic container of milk or yogurt).

This experience transformed me in ways that I hope watching this video will transform you. I now see plastics everywhere and try to avoid them. I have plasticware in my house, but I reuse it. If I see plastic trash on the street, I go out of my way to pick it up. No, that is not my plastic water bottle rolling around on the sidewalk, but I will pick it up because it is my planet.