

# THE PLASTIC-FREE CHALLENGE

by Deanna Ferguson

Have you heard of the Great Pacific Garbage Patch? It's a mass of floating rubbish in the Pacific Ocean. Most of the rubbish is plastic that's been thrown away by humans. The students of Room 5 at Motueka South School watched a video about it. The video showed images of dead or injured sea creatures. Some had eaten the plastic. Others had become tangled in it.



We were amazed that there was so much plastic in the ocean.

Plastic is made from oil. It breaks down into little pieces, but it never, ever goes away!



Plastic is killing animals - I want to help save them.



## THE STATISTICS

The Great Pacific Garbage Patch:

- covers about 1.6 million square kilometres (nearly six times the size of New Zealand!)
- is made up of about 80 million kilograms of plastic.

Scientists believe that over a million seabirds and one hundred thousand marine mammals die each year from eating plastic.



The Great Pacific Garbage Patch

The students wanted to do something to help solve the plastic problem. That's how the Plastic-free Challenge began.



Maybe we could have a challenge, where one day a week, we bring a lunchbox with no plastic in it.

### The challenge begins

The class made Tuesdays the day for the challenge to be plastic-free. It wasn't hard to reduce the amount of plastic in lunchboxes. The students wrapped their sandwiches in lunch paper instead of cling film. They replaced shop-bought muesli bars with home-made ones. They brought fruit instead of other snacks. The amount of plastic went down fast.

It was a good start, but what about the rest of the school? How much plastic was being brought by other classes? The students wanted to find out. One Tuesday, Room 5 collected the whole school's plastic rubbish. They were shocked – there was so much!



### The challenge goes school-wide

Room 5 decided to challenge the whole school to join Plastic-free Tuesday. At assembly, they showed the Great Pacific Garbage Patch video to the other students. Everyone was silent when they saw the photos of the sea creatures. Then Nikson and Pepper walked onstage. They were carrying a net full of plastic – the rubbish Room 5 had collected in only one day. The hall was filled with sounds of shock and surprise. Room 5 knew they had everyone hooked. The challenge was on!



Some Room 5 students teamed up with buddies from Room 6 to make models of sea creatures. Every Tuesday, Room 5 collected the school's plastic rubbish and stuffed it into the model creatures. To begin with, the creatures needed to be large. As the weeks passed, the creatures became smaller. After seven weeks, the amount of plastic had reduced by half!



### What do we do with all the plastic?

Room 5 were really pleased that people were using less plastic. However, now they had another problem – a huge pile of plastic in their classroom! What could they do with it?

Then Ryan saw a headline in the paper: “Soft plastic recycling has landed.” The article said the major supermarkets were collecting soft plastic for recycling. This was just what the group needed. They sorted the plastic into different types. Then they bundled it up and took it to a nearby supermarket.

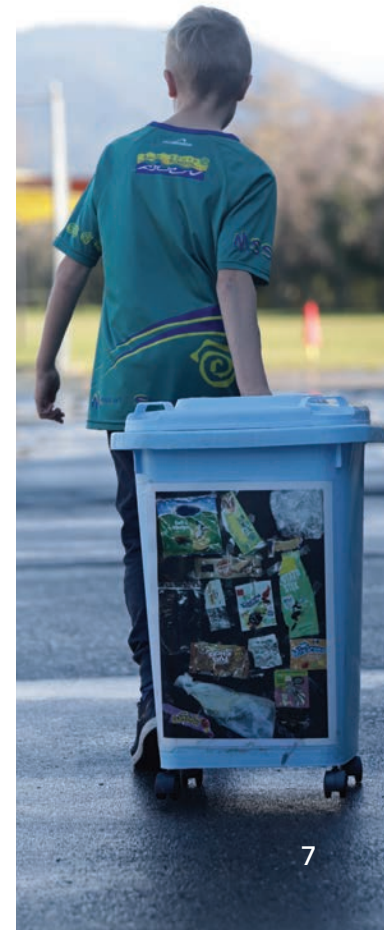


### Daily collection

Room 5 had solved the problem of what to do with the plastic. But then they asked themselves, “Why only Tuesdays?” They decided it was time for daily collections across the school. This was turning into a big project!

They made a plan. First, they found out where they could buy recycling bins. Then they made two lists – things that could be recycled and things that couldn't. They took photos of the recyclable items and made a poster to put on the bins. That way, everyone would know what should go in them.

The students presented their plan to the principal. He agreed that it was a great idea – the daily school-wide rubbish collection was under way.



## Making it sustainable

Today, the project is going well. The students take turns to monitor the plastic collection. Every Friday, Ryan and his mum take the plastic to the supermarket collection bin.

A group of students gets together regularly to discuss how the project is going. They share ideas, solve problems, and brainstorm ways to make the system better. They also decide who will be responsible for making the ideas happen.

The group is training younger students to be monitors, too. That means when the older students move on to high school, there will be others to take over and keep the project going. They want it to be sustainable.



## THE OCEAN CLEAN-UP KID

When Room 5 were learning about the Great Pacific Garbage Patch, they also found out about a young Dutch man named Boyan Slat. His achievements helped inspire Room 5's own plastic clean-up project. Boyan has a plan to clean up the Great Pacific Garbage Patch. He wants to use huge floating booms to trap the rubbish as it moves on the ocean currents. After a lot of research and trialling, his project started in 2018. The students will be watching with great interest.



## Everyone can make a difference

The students have learnt a lot about plastic and what it does to our planet. Now they are always looking for new ways to reduce plastic use and to share the “reduce, reuse, and recycle” message.

Most of all, they've learnt that although some problems can seem huge, it's still possible to make a difference. You might start small, but you can inspire others to join you. That can lead to really big changes – for your school, your community, your country, and your planet.

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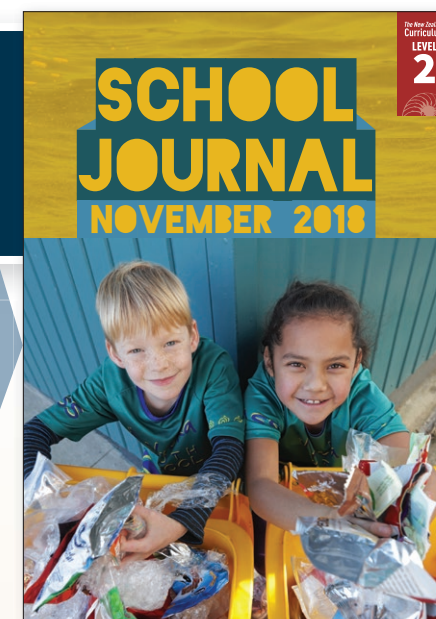
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