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1 **Microplastics are not important for the cycling and bioaccumulation of organic pollutants**  
2 **in the oceans – but should microplastics be considered POPs themselves?**

3 by **Rainer Lohmann**

4

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8

9 **Background**

10 This commentary discusses the current evidence about current prevailing themes on the  
11 relationship between marine microplastics and organic pollutants. In this context, microplastics  
12 can be defined as particles < 5 mm in size [Thompson *et al.*, 2004]. This plastic debris, mostly  
13 from anthropogenic land-based sources, fragments into smaller pieces over time [Jambeck *et al.*,  
14 2015].

15

16 **Do microplastics accumulate high concentrations of organic pollutants.**

17 The current body of evidence suggests that this is true, as microplastics act – as do polymers in  
18 general - as passive samplers of organic pollutants. The specific affinity of a given organic  
19 pollutant for a polymer dictates its overall enrichment factor (partitioning constant) in the  
20 microplastic [Rusina *et al.*, 2007]. The specific affinity for various hydrophobic organic  
21 contaminants (HOCs) for polymers has been determined in numerous laboratory and field  
22 calibrations in which the partitioning constants between passive samplers and water or air were  
23 measured [Adams *et al.*, 2007; Rusina *et al.*, 2007; Smedes *et al.*, 2009; Lohmann, 2012;

24 *Pintado-Herrera et al.*, 2016; *Ziccardi et al.*, 2016]. The polymers most commonly used as  
25 passive samplers in field experiments include polyethylene (PE), silicone rubber (SR) and  
26 polyoxymethylene (POM) sheets.

27 There is also plenty of field evidence showing that generic plastic debris accumulates organic  
28 pollutants [*Karapanagioti et al.*, 2011; *Rochman et al.*, 2012; *Endo et al.*, 2013]. A prominent  
29 example is the so-called ‘pellet watch’ global monitoring program, which relies on plastic pellets  
30 collected by volunteers from across the globe [*Hirai et al.*, 2011]. In these studies, strong  
31 enrichment of HOCs in the polymers, often exceeding  $10^6$  times relative to their dissolved  
32 concentrations was found.

33

#### 34 **How significantly will microplastics contribute to the dispersion and global cycling of** 35 **POPs?**

36 It has become common knowledge that microplastics are present around the globe, and have  
37 been found in all ocean gyres, coastal seas and beaches [*Jambeck et al.*, 2015; *Seville et al.*,  
38 2015]. It should therefore be no surprise that the concept of microplastics as being important for  
39 the global dispersion of organic pollutants, in particular persistent organic pollutants (POPs), a  
40 subgroup of persistent HOCs, has been suggested. Yet, numerous studies have refuted that idea  
41 [*Zarfl and Matthies*, 2010; *Gouin et al.*, 2011; *Koelmans et al.*, 2016; *Ziccardi et al.*, 2016].

42 There is simply not enough microplastic and plastic debris present in the oceans to outcompete  
43 the partitioning of POPs to water and natural organic matter (such as phytoplankton). In  
44 *Koelman et al.* [2016]’s analysis of a strongly HOC (concentrated  $10^7$  times from water), ocean  
45 water nonetheless contained 99% of the HOC, followed by DOC and colloids (0.4% each);  
46 microplastics captured  $\sim 10^{-4}$  % of the total mass present in the oceans.

47 In addition, diffusion of HOCs in and out of microplastics is slow. The time for various dissolved  
48 polychlorinated biphenyls (PCBs) to reach equilibrium with a 50 µm or 500 µm PE sheet ranges  
49 from days to decades [Lohmann and Muir, 2010; Endo et al., 2013]. Thus the release of these  
50 contaminants from the microplastic present in the remote ocean will be strongly retarded [Endo  
51 et al., 2013; Bakir et al., 2014b] and only add a small contribution relative to already present  
52 POPs at any given place and time. Results by Zarfl and Matthies [2010] also implied that  
53 microplastics are not an efficient transport vector of HOCs in comparison to long range transport  
54 by ocean or atmosphere, except for very high log K<sub>ow</sub> chemicals, which have otherwise limited  
55 transport potential in air and water.

56 Lastly, a comparison of microplastic particle density in the Pacific Ocean as detected by the Sea  
57 Education Association (SEA; Lavender-Law, personal communication) and measured  
58 concentrations of PCBs in surface seawater in the region [Zhang and Lohmann, 2010] found  
59 little correlation between both.

60

## 61 **To what extent to microplastics contribute to the bioaccumulation and foodweb transfer of** 62 **POPs?**

63 There has been a long-standing assumption in many articles and studies that microplastics are  
64 efficient carriers of organic pollutants into biota and the foodweb [Teuten et al., 2009; Rochman  
65 et al., 2013; Chua et al., 2014; Batel et al., 2016; Wardrop et al., 2016]. Such arguments have  
66 been based on the notion that microplastics enrich various POPs (correct, see above), coupled  
67 with the assumption that inside an animal, these pollutants are stripped off or leach out of the  
68 microplastic and are taken up by the organism (e.g., [Teuten et al., 2007; Bakir et al., 2014a]). It  
69 is worth recalling that chemicals diffuse to achieve the same chemical activity in the

70 environment, be that water, microplastic or biota [*Schwarzenbach et al.*, 2003]. Just because  
71 microplastics display greater concentrations of POPs than present in water does not mean that  
72 there is a greater tendency for these pollutants to diffuse out of the plastic particles. The potential  
73 importance of microplastics as carriers of POPs into animals remains a strong theme in  
74 discussion on microplastics, though, seemingly corroborated by empirical evidence [*Teuten et*  
75 *al.*, 2009], it requires deeper examination. This will be addressed in more detail below using the  
76 three scenarios outlined in Figure 1, in which (a) a naturally contaminated fish ingests a naturally  
77 contaminated microplastic (e.g., both collected in the wild); (b) a clean fish consumes a  
78 contaminated microplastic particle (e.g., in laboratory experiments), and (c) a reverse set-up,  
79 where a contaminated fish consumes a pollutant-free microplastic particle. Examples from the  
80 literature supporting these different scenarios are listed in Table 1. At a very basic level,  
81 equilibrium partitioning thinking can be used to define simple expectations in which way organic  
82 pollutants will move in a bioaccumulation thought experiment.

83

#### 84 Scenario A

85 As outlined in scenario a) (Figure 1) a fish and piece of microplastic both contain POPs  
86 already, simply from occurring in the environment. The presence of POPs in the fish, and a  
87 microplastic residing in the same environment, are driven by the contaminants' chemical activity  
88 and ought to be the same in both fish and microplastic particles. The ingestion of the  
89 microplastic by the fish does not change the contaminant burden by the fish or the microplastic,  
90 as they are both already in equilibrium [*Gouin et al.*, 2011]. This should be the most prevalent  
91 interaction of biota, microplastics, and POPs in the natural environment, as animals are  
92 constantly taking up POPs from the environment via their diet and respiration. There are neither

93 clean (i.e., POPs-free) oceans nor animals present, which means that they will bioaccumulate  
94 POPs regardless of whether they ingest microplastics or not.

95 In the South Atlantic Ocean, there was generally no correlation between HOCs in microplastics  
96 and amphipods [*Rochman et al.*, 2014]. Of the targeted HOCs (bisphenol A (BPA), alkylphenols,  
97 alkylphenol ethoxylates, PCBs, and polybrominated diphenyl ethers (PBDEs)), only PBDEs  
98 displayed increased body burdens in regions where more microplastics were present. The  
99 presence of PBDEs in tissues could be due to the presence of small microplastic particles during  
100 the extraction (see below). Another good example of scenario of (a) is the recent study in which  
101 birds and the microplastics in their gut were analyzed for PCBs [*Herzke et al.*, 2016]. The  
102 authors concluded that the presence of PCBs in the fulmars due to the ingestion of plastics was  
103 negligible relative to the uptake of PCBs via their prey.

104 Similar conclusions were reached earlier by Gouin et al. (2011) based on theoretical  
105 considerations based on a bioaccumulation food web model. Lastly, Koelmans et al. (2016) also  
106 concluded that there is no experimental or theoretical evidence for an important role of  
107 microplastics in the transfer of POPs into animals.

108

#### 109 Scenario B

110 This scenario consists of exposing clean animals from a reference site to microplastics  
111 containing a high concentration of POPs, either from laboratory dosing or from microplastics  
112 exposed to contaminants at urban/industrialized sites. Most reported bioaccumulation studies  
113 with microplastics are based on this scenario, such as the ingestion of PBDE-spiked particles by  
114 amphipods in the laboratory [*Chua et al.*, 2014]. Interestingly, the experiment actually resulted in  
115 decreased PBDE bioaccumulation uptake relative to control animals. Other experiments used

116 field-contaminated microplastic particles. For example, Teuten et al. (2009) described the  
117 feeding of microplastics naturally contaminated by PCBs from Tokyo Bay to shearwater chicks  
118 hidden in a fish diet. Initially, some uptake of lower chlorinated PCBs was observed, but the  
119 PCBs ingested from the bird's prey fish outweighed the birds' body burden over time [*Teuten et*  
120 *al.*, 2009].

121 In general, an efficient transfer of POPs from the microplastic to the animals is observed. This is  
122 due to the experimental design, and shows that microplastic can be used as a vector for POPs  
123 into animals. ***It does not demonstrate, however, that this pathway is relevant in the field.*** As  
124 noted above, animals in the wild are typically as 'contaminated' with respect to POPs as the  
125 microplastic particles they might consume. The conclusion that microplastics is not an important  
126 transfer process was also reached in a study exposing lugworms to sediments enriched with field-  
127 contaminated polystyrene particles [*Besseling et al.*, 2013]. The observed increase in PCB  
128 bioaccumulation (1.1 – 1.5 times relative to controls) was only observed at low concentrations of  
129 polystyrene particles.

130

### 131 Scenario C

132 This scenario is the reverse of scenario b) in which a POP-contaminated fish is fed clean  
133 microplastic to determine if this will lower its body burden with respect to the POP. The idea is  
134 based on research that olestra, a non-digestible fat, can be used to remove POPs from  
135 contaminated animals [*Moser and McLachlan*, 1999]. Gouin et al. (2011) picked up this idea in  
136 their bioaccumulation model, suggesting that the ingestion of clean microplastic could indeed  
137 cause a decreased body burden in animals. Recently, Rummel et al. (2016), did not observe a



138 significant decrease in bioaccumulation of PCBs in rainbow trout allowed to ingest clean  
139 microplastics.

140

#### 141 **Do microplastics transfer other organic contaminants into biota?**

142 As discussed above, there is little evidence that microplastics play a major role in the  
143 bioaccumulation of POPs, when compared to the role of diet in nature. As already discussed by  
144 [Teuten *et al.*, 2009] and [Gouin *et al.*, 2011], microplastics could become an important pathway  
145 for polymer additives that otherwise would not be easily transferred into the marine environment.  
146 In particular, [Teuten *et al.*, 2009] suggested research should focus on the release of phenolic  
147 additive-derived chemicals (i.e., alkylphenols and BPA) from microplastics in the food web. Yet  
148 neither a modeling study by [Koelmans *et al.*, 2014] nor the field study by [Rochman *et al.*,  
149 2014] found evidence that the ingestion of microplastics is relevant for the uptake of these  
150 compounds by biota.

151 Several recent studies highlighted that certain chemicals, likely originating from plastic particles,  
152 can indeed be transferred into animals. The presence of highly brominated BDEs 183 and 209 in  
153 seabirds was linked to their ingestion of marine plastics [Tanaka *et al.*, 2013]. The birds' prey  
154 items had no detectable BDE 183 and 109 concentrations but these contaminants were observed  
155 in both the birds and ingested plastic debris particles. Similarly, the presence of  
156 hexabromocyclododecanes (HBCDs) in Styrofoam and blue mussels from coastal South Korea  
157 were linked [Jang *et al.*, 2016]. Elevated concentrations, and a  $\alpha/\gamma$ HBCD ratio closer to that of  
158 Styrofoam were detected in mussels colonizing Styrofoam buoys, when compared to mussels  
159 collected from other substrates and regions along the coast. Overall, strong evidence was

160 presented for a direct pathway of HBCD from the Styrofoam buoy into the mussel, including the  
161 detection of Styrofoam particles in the mussels themselves.

162 As there is good evidence that brominated compounds can be metabolized in animals [*Stapleton*  
163 *et al.*, 2004], the presence of several low solubility brominated compounds (highly brominated  
164 BDEs, HBCD) in biota, linked to the ingestion of microplastics, seems surprising at first. Yet it  
165 might actually indicate that these compounds are not properly dissolved in the animals, but rather  
166 part of nanoplastic particles dispersed within the animals' tissue and organs.

167

#### 168 **Should microplastics be considered POPs?**

169 While the preceding discussion highlighted that microplastics in the oceans do little to affect the  
170 presence and transfer of most organic pollutants at this point, there is still plenty of evidence that  
171 microplastics are harmful and their impact should be minimized, as far as possible. This be could  
172 be seen as a contribution towards a sustainable use of resources.

173 One approach would be to consider classifying microplastics as potential pollutants under the  
174 Stockholm Convention on POPs [*UNEP*, 2001]. Four criteria, namely persistence,  
175 bioaccumulation, long-range transport and adverse effects (Table 2), must be met for a  
176 compound to be listed as a POP. There is strong evidence that microplastics are persistent, as a  
177 result of their industrial polymer properties and additives [*Gewert et al.*, 2015], and that they  
178 undergo long-range transport, as documented by their widespread presence in remote oceans  
179 [*Lavender Law et al.*, 2010; *Sebille et al.*, 2015]. Several ecotoxicological studies highlight  
180 adverse effects, though these experiments are often performed at unrealistically high doses of  
181 microplastic exposure. The classical concept of bioaccumulation and biomagnification on a

182 molecular level is not met, but there is evidence that microplastics are present in top predators  
183 and are transferred up the food chain.

184

185 In summary, there is little evidence that marine microplastics affect the global transport or  
186 bioaccumulation of POPs in the oceans. In terms of bioaccumulation, experimental designs can  
187 be manipulated to show that microplastics are a vector of POPs into organisms in the laboratory.  
188 Yet, there is scant evidence from field studies that the ingestion of microplastics affects the  
189 bioaccumulation of POPs. While there are some studies that show several low-solubility  
190 compounds increase in animals that have ingested more microplastics, this might in fact be from  
191 the presence of micro- and nanoplastic particles in those animals. Just because microplastics are  
192 not relevant for the transport of POPs does not take away from their potential for detrimental  
193 impacts on the environment. A possibility to address these concerns could be to consider marine  
194 (micro)plastics as POPs, and rely on the Stockholm Convention to reduce their sources.

195

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