

Fast Fashion and Our Ocean

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Introduction

The oceans cover over 70% of Earth's surface[1] and produce more than half of the oxygen we breathe[2]. They also act as a global climate regulator, absorbing about 90% of excess heat and roughly 25% of human-emitted CO₂[3]. Even inland communities depend on the ocean for climate stability and resources.

Fast fashion is one of the world's most polluting industries – not just on land, but in our oceans too. This resource explores how what we wear affects marine life, aquatic ecosystems, and coastal communities. Students will investigate the link between fast fashion and marine litter – from plastic microfibres in the sea to clothing dumped in the Global South.

This lesson also supports Green-Schools' Global Citizenship Marine Environment theme and supports the Climate Action and Sustainability subject at Leaving Certificate level – particularly in the areas of environmental systems, social justice, and global connections.



Questions to explore with your students

- What is the connection between clothing and ocean pollution?
- How do microfibres from synthetic clothing enter the sea?
- What happens to old clothes we throw away?
- How is fast fashion affecting communities and ecosystems worldwide?
- What can young people do to fix fashion – and protect the ocean?

Learning Outcomes / Curriculum Links (aligned to LC Climate Action & Sustainability):

Strand	Learning Outcome
Strand 1: Earth Systems, Life, and Environment	Understand the sources and pathways of marine pollution (e.g. microfibres), evaluate how fast fashion contributes to ocean degradation.
Strand 2: People, Power, and Place	Explore how clothing choices are linked to environmental justice, consumer behaviour, and waste management in Ireland and beyond.
Strand 3: Global Connections	Investigate the environmental and social impacts of clothing trade and waste exportation, especially between Ireland/EU and countries like Kenya.

Lesson Structure

This lesson can take place over two class periods

Step 1: Opening Discussion (5 - 10 minutes)



Ask students to check the labels on their clothing (don't forget shoes!) raise their hands if they are wearing synthetic materials (e.g. polyester, nylon, acrylic). Most students will be!

Ask and discuss:

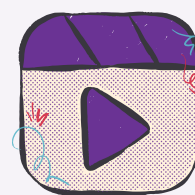
- Do you know how your clothes affect the ocean?
- Where do you think your clothes go when you throw them away? Explain that we will be discussing this throughout the lesson.

Step 2. Watch & Reflect (10 mins)



Video Suggestions:

- The Story of Stuff: Microfibres (4 mins)
- Kenya becomes a Victim of Fast Fashion (3 mins)



Discussion Prompt:

- What surprised you in the video?
- How is ocean pollution connected to our clothes?

Step 3. Worksheet 1 – Fast Fashion's Ocean Footprint (5 - 10 mins)



Print **Worksheet 1** and invite students to complete individually or in pairs. Alternatively display on screen and engage in a classroom discussion, using the worksheet as a guide.

Answers: 1 = B, 2 = E, 3 = A, 4 = D, 5 = C

Step 4. Global Connections Case Study: Ireland & Kenya (20-25 mins)

Introduction for teachers



Fast fashion doesn't just pollute during production – what we do with our clothes after we're finished with them matters too. Many people donate clothes, thinking they're being helpful. But the global second-hand clothing trade is complex – especially in countries like Kenya.

Ireland exports used clothing. Kenya imports it. But 30-40% is waste that ends up in landfills or rivers. Students can trace the journey of second-hand clothing from an Irish home to Kenyan dump sites (activity continued on next page).

Follow the journey of your clothes through our Let's Fix Fashion Global Threads resource. Click here to access Global Threads.

Lesson Structure

Step 4. Global Connections Case Study: Ireland & Kenya (10–15 mins)

Activity steps:

1. Hand out or project fact sheet (available at end of this resource)

Go through fact sheet and discuss:

- “Where do you think our donated clothes go?”
- Debate: “Donating clothes is helpful - or harmful?”
- “How do you think it affects the ocean?”

2. Set the Scene (5 mins - or longer if exploring Global Threads):

Project a world map or use Google Earth to trace a clothing donation journey. Alternatively, explore the [Let's Fix Fashion Global Threads Resource](#) and follow the journey of your clothing from raw material to landfill. This will give an idea of the journey and final destination of clothing donated to clothing banks in Ireland.

3. Watch video and discuss (15 - 20 mins):

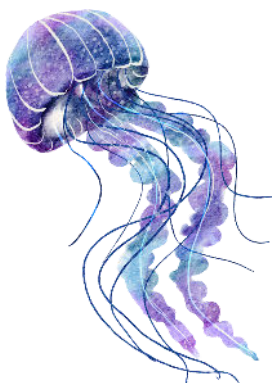
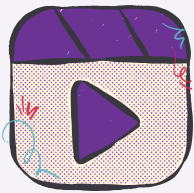
Watch the video **Trashion: The stealth export of waste plastic clothes to Kenya** with your class and discuss the following:

- One surprising thing they learned
- One question they have after watching

4. Hand out worksheet (10 mins):

Invite students to complete worksheet. Hint: the fact sheet will support the answers.

Answers: 1 = D, 2 = C, 3 = B, 4 = A



Key Takeaway Learning from this Lesson Plan

What we do with our clothes after we wear them matters. Even when they leave our hands, they still leave a footprint – sometimes on the beaches and rivers of other countries. Being a global citizen means making fair and informed choices.

Worksheet 1: Fast Fashion's Ocean Footprint

Match the fashion action to its marine impact:

Fashion Habit



1. Buying cheap polyester tops weekly



2. Using a dryer instead of line-drying



3. Throwing clothes in the bin



4. Washing clothes frequently



5. Buying second-hand

Ocean Impact



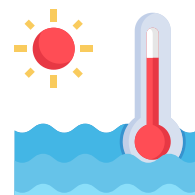
A. Landfill runoff leaks into water systems



B. Plastic microfibres wash into rivers & oceans



C. Reduces textile waste & pollution



D. Contributes to carbon emissions that warm oceans



E. Synthetic fibres break down slowly, polluting oceans

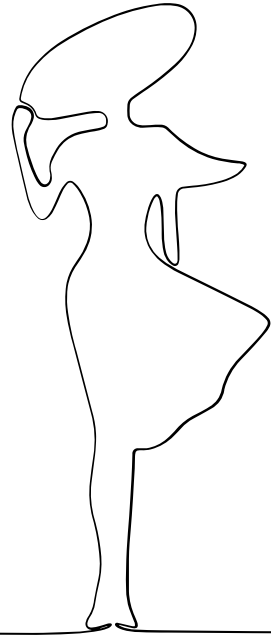


Worksheet 2: Fixing Fashion - Student Action Plan


My Fast Fashion Footprint:


How many of these apply to you? (tick all that apply)

- I've bought clothes I never wore. ☐
- I wash my clothes after 1 wear even if they're clean. ☐
- I own over 30 items of clothing. ☐
- I regularly buy from online fast fashion brands. ☐
- I've binned clothes instead of donating/reusing. ☐




What Could I Change? (Circle 2 actions you could try this month:)


 Swap clothes with friends

 Wash clothes less often (unless needed)

 Buy second-hand

 Choose natural fibres (cotton, hemp)

 Repair or upcycle old clothes

 Talk about fashion waste on social media

Our class Campaign Idea

In groups, brainstorm a 2-week action project.

Write your campaign name and 3 action steps here:

Campaign Name:

Action 1:

Action 2:

Action 3:

Examples:

- Host a clothes swap
- Display a "Journey of a T-Shirt" infographic
- Organise a beach clean & fashion talk
- Survey students on clothing waste

Worksheet 3: Ireland to Kenya – Who Pays the Price?

Facts and Figures

Complete the sentences:

- % of clothes sent to Kenya that are unsellable: _____
- How these clothes reach the ocean: _____

- Name one marine animal affected by textile pollution: _____

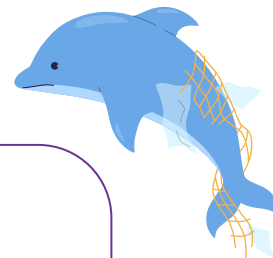


Whose responsibility is it? (Match the role to the issue)

- | | |
|-----------------------|--|
| 1. European consumers | A. Regulate or fail to regulate clothing trade |
| 2. Clothing brands | B. Receive waste and deal with clean-up |
| 3. Kenyan traders | C. Create cheap, disposable fashion |
| 4. Governments | D. Export clothes without accountability |

Solutions

List 2 fairer ways this system could work:



Do you think Ireland should stop exporting used clothes overseas?

What do you think we should do with our old clothes instead?

Global Connections Fact Sheet

Key Facts:

Each year, over **900 million items** of used clothing are shipped from the Global North (including Ireland) to Kenya.

An estimated **40%** of these are not reusable or sellable and are immediately dumped or burned.

This “**textile dumping**” pollutes rivers, beaches, and neighbourhoods, with some clothing washing up along the Kenyan coast.

This is sometimes called “**fashion colonialism**” – exporting the environmental cost of fast fashion to poorer nations.

Marine animals, from plankton to whales, ingest microfibres, mistaking them for food.

Up to **35% of microplastics** in the ocean come from synthetic textiles like polyester, nylon, and acrylic. These microfibres are released every time we wash synthetic clothes, and many pass through wastewater treatment systems into rivers and seas.

A single load of synthetic clothes in a washing machine can shed up to **700,000** plastic microfibres, which often end up in oceans and are consumed by marine organisms.

Studies have shown that microplastic particles and fibres are present in the majority of marine sampling sites around Ireland, including in fish and shellfish destined for human consumption.

The fashion industry impacts oceans through:

1. Chemical runoff from dyeing and finishing processes
2. Wastewater discharge into rivers and coasts
3. Plastic packaging from online fashion deliveries
4. Fossil fuel use in synthetic fibre production (e.g. polyester = oil)



References and Resources

- Greenpeace (2023). Poisoned Gifts: Fast Fashion's Waste Crisis in East Africa.
- Greenpeace (2024) Fast Fashion, Slow Poison: The Toxic Textile Crisis in Ghana
- Story of Stuff Project (2017). The Story of Microfibers.
- European Environment Agency (2021). Microplastics from textiles: implications for the ocean.
- Ocean Wise (2020). Domestic laundry and microfibre release.
- Irish Times (2023). Microplastics found at 90% of Irish marine sites.
- UN Sustainable Development Goals
- UN Environment Programme (2019). Sustainability and Circularity in the Textile Value Chain.