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UCT-led study finds increase in plastic bottle pollution on Marion Island

A long-term study led by researchers from the University of Cape Town's (UCT) [FitzPatrick Institute of African Ornithology](#) found that when litter was first surveyed on Marion Island in 1984, more than half of all items came from the island's research station. Since then, the amount of beached litter has increased substantially, but litter from the research station has decreased due to improvements in solid waste management, with local land-based litter currently accounting for less than 1% of all litter.

The study further showed that offshore-sourced litter decreased from the 1990s to the 2000s following the collapse of the Patagonian Toothfish fishery in waters around the island, but has increased again over the last 20 years, mainly due to the rapid growth in the number of plastic bottles.

Marion Island is afforded the highest level of conservation protection under South African law. It lies in the heart of the 'roaring forties', south-southeast of Africa, in an area with very little shipping or other human activity. The island is home to a South African research station, and for the last 30 years, field teams have collected the litter washing up on the island's shoreline.

Published in [Marine Pollution Bulletin](#), the study was led by UCT's [Emeritus Professor Peter Ryan](#), in collaboration with researchers from Nelson Mandela University and the Department of Forestry, Fisheries and the Environment.

"A study on the origins of these bottles is still under review, but we know from studies in other parts of the Southern Hemisphere that most [plastic bottles washing](#) up on remote islands have been [dumped from ships](#) in contravention of international legislation," said Emeritus Professor Ryan.

"The study highlights the recent increase in floating plastic litter, and especially plastic bottles, in even the remote and hitherto largely litter-free Southern Ocean. It follows shortly after the 'smoking gun' evidence of illegal dumping at sea off Australia by a tanker contracted by [ExxonMobil](#), and places yet more pressure on the International Maritime Organization to strengthen measures to ensure that ship's crews stop dumping plastics and other persistent wastes at sea."

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