Plastic pollution in the ocean, rivers, and lakes harms aquatic animals and ecosystems in the U.S. and around the world. As the volume of plastic pollution increases each year, so will the frequency of these impacts on marine and freshwater wildlife.

Plastic pollution harms animals when they accidentally eat it, or get tangled in it. Nearly 700 species of marine animals have been impacted by marine trash, most of which is plastic. Plastic accounts for 92 percent of all encounters between marine animals and marine trash.

Plastic pollution has impacted:

- All known species of sea turtles.
- 54 percent of marine mammal species, including whales, dolphins and porpoises.
- 56 percent of seabird species.

Today, over half of all sea turtles on the planet have ingested plastic. And scientists estimate that by 2050, over 99 percent of all seabird species—and over 90 percent of all individual seabirds—will have ingested plastic.  

When animals become tangled in plastic, they can drown or suffocate. When they ingest plastic, they are at risk of starvation due to gut obstruction and reduced fitness. And when coral comes in contact with plastic, its likelihood of contracting a coral disease increases twenty-fold.

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2 Gall and Thompson
3 Gall and Thompson
6 Gall and Thompson
7 Gall and Thompson
8 Lamb et al., Plastic waste associated with disease on coral reefs, Science, 2018, http://science.sciencemag.org/content/359/6374/460
Juvenile marine animals are at higher risk of negative impacts from plastic pollution than their adult counterparts.12

Another concerning consequence of ingestion is that the chemical constituents of plastic, as well as the toxins they absorb in the aquatic environment, can concentrate and enter the marine food chain.9

Of the most commonly found plastic pollution on beaches, plastic bags and balloons pose considerable entanglement risk to marine animals, while plastic food packaging, straws and utensils pose a high risk of ingestion.10

Juvenile marine animals are at higher risk of harm from plastic pollution than their adult counterparts.11 These impacts are particularly significant for the 17 percent of species affected by plastic pollution that are also listed as near threatened, vulnerable, endangered or critically endangered by the IUCN.12

Of particular concern are plastic fragments less than 5 mm in size, known as microplastic, which are either manufactured at this size or created when larger plastic items break down into smaller pieces.13 Their small size enables microplastic to enter the food chain at the lowest trophic levels.14 Microplastic has been found in the digestive tracts of both marine and freshwater species.15

In order to lower the risk that aquatic animals will eat or get tangled in plastic, we must stop making and using so much of it.

References
10 Gall and Thompson
12 Gall and Thompson
13 NOAA Marine Debris Program, Microplastic Marine Debris, https://marinedebris.noaa.gov/sites/default/files/MicroplasticsOnePager_0.pdf