

Plastic waste trade: After China's ban, more countries restrict imports

China's ban on plastic scrap and waste imports¹ has unveiled the hidden dynamics of the global plastic waste trade. The world has discovered that plastics collected for recycling are actually being exported with scarce control or care for their real destiny. These materials may not even be recycled, ending up in landfills, dumps or waterways and endangering the environment and human health in importing countries.

Until 2017, China took 51% of all plastic waste traded globally. When China shut its ports to plastic scrap imports, exporting nations soon began looking for new countries to absorb the orphaned waste. Southeast Asia is the most impacted region. According to plastic recycling media sources, **Thailand's plastic waste imports increased by 640%** from January to June 2018, compared the same period the previous year.² By June, there were 30,000 idle containers at the country's ports, due to problems with import permits and lack of capacity.³ **Plastic waste imports in Taiwan were 2.5 times higher** the first quarter of this year, compared to the same period in 2017. As a result, the price of domestic plastic waste in Taiwan has plummeted.⁴

Export shifts to select countries for paper and plastic scrap

All figures reflect the change between the first four months of 2017, compared to Jan. to April of 2018.

Country	Net exports (\$)	Change in paper (%)	Change in plastics (%)
India	\$86,750,558	+88%	-21%
Malaysia	\$26,894,423	+27%	+611%
Thailand	\$25,692,026	+20%	+6,895%
Vietnam	\$23,587,489	+134%	+82%
Indonesia	\$14,977,355	+105%	-75%
Canada	\$6,906,785	+19%	-9%
South Korea	\$3,811,929	0%	+501%
Mexico	-\$114,763	0%	+4%
Hong Kong	-\$48,111,256	-33%	-74%
China	-\$329,571,705	-37%	-90%

Source: Descartes Datamyne

¹ WTO, *China's import ban on solid waste queried at import licensing meeting* 10/03/2017
https://www.wto.org/english/news_e/news17_e/impl_03oct17_e.htm

² Plastics Recycling Update, *Markets update: Asian countries further limit plastic imports*, 8/22/2018
<https://resource-recycling.com/plastics/2018/08/22/markets-update-asian-countries-further-limit-plastic-imports/>

³ Plastics Recycling Update, *Thailand bans scrap plastic imports*, 6/27/2018
<https://resource-recycling.com/plastics/2018/06/27/thailand-bans-scrap-plastic-imports/>

⁴ Taipei Times, *Rules proposed to curb imports of waste*, 8/14/2018
<http://www.taipetimes.com/News/taiwan/archives/2018/08/14/2003698509>

By June, several Southeast Asian countries started to take action to protect themselves against this plastic scourge. **Thailand issued a temporary ban on the import of plastic waste and e-waste last June,**⁵ and is now presenting a set of policies that include banning plastic waste imports permanently within the next two years. As in China's case, Thailand's authorities claim that continuing to be the reluctant recipient of the flood of imported waste prevents the country from developing its own collection and recycling systems for domestic waste,⁶ and creates environmental pollution and suffering for local communities.⁷

Vietnam stopped issuing plastic recycling import licenses in June 2018 after a series of violations, including imported waste failing to meet quality standards, mislabeling, falsified import permits and even unlicensed imports.⁸ According to media reports, the country is expected to ban plastic waste imports in the future.⁹ **Malaysia revoked the approved permits for plastic waste imports for three months effective 23 July 2018** as a preventive temporary measure, and citizens are raising the alarm about illegal recycling operations that are polluting the surrounding environment and jeopardising public health.

Even the skyrocketing imports to Southeast Asian countries have not relieved the growing pressure caused by plastic waste now backing up in U.S., E.U., and other countries in the wake of China's restrictions. **Taiwan recently proposed a set of policies to regulate imports of plastic waste,** including permission for businesses to import only plastic waste originated from their own overseas production processes, and prioritizing the purchase of domestic waste over foreign. These policies are expected to become effective in October.¹⁰

As more countries shield themselves against the dangers of foreign waste, **the tide of plastic waste may well find its way to other Asian countries such as India, as well as African countries, although this risk is insufficiently acknowledged.** It is critical that the international community find ways to halt the proliferation of plastic waste, not merely shift the burden of managing the ever-increasing load onto other countries. An important first step would be to reclassify plastic scrap under the Basel Convention to mandate more transparency and regulation of the global plastic scrap market. Countries have a right to know exactly what is being sent to their shores so that they can make informed decisions that fit the needs of their citizens and their environment.

⁵ National News Bureau of Thailand, *Thailand halts imports of electronic, plastic waste*, 6/24/2018
http://thainews.prd.go.th/website_en/news/news_detail/WNECO6106240010004

⁶ The Nation, *Govt to ban import of electronic, plastic wastes*, 8/16/2018
<http://www.nationmultimedia.com/detail/national/30352239>

⁷ Plastics Recycling Update, *Markets update: Asian countries further limit plastic imports*, 8/22/2018

⁸ Plastics Recycling Update, *Why Vietnam is shutting out scrap plastic*, 5/31/2018

<https://resource-recycling.com/plastics/2018/05/31/why-vietnam-is-shutting-out-scrap-plastic/>

⁹ Plastics Recycling Update, *Markets update: Asian countries further limit plastic imports*, 8/22/2018

¹⁰ Taipei Times, *Rules proposed to curb imports of waste*, 8/14/2018