

Jansen, Marcel A.K., Andrady, Anthony L., Barnes, Paul W., Busquets, Rosa, Revell, Laura E., Bornman, Janet F., Aucamp, Pieter J., Bais, Alkiviadis F., Banaszak, Anastazia T., Bernhard, Germar H., Bruckman, Laura S., Häder, Donat P., Hanson, Mark L., Heikkilä, Anu M., Hylander, Samuel, Lucas, Robyn M., Mackenzie, Roy, Madronich, Sasha, Neale, Patrick J., Neale, Rachel E., Olsen, Catherine M., Ossola, Rachele, Pandey, Krishna K., Petropavlovskikh, Irina, Robinson, Sharon A., Robson, Matthew ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8631-796X>, Rose, Kevin C., Solomon, Keith R., Sulbæk Andersen, Mads P., Sulzberger, Barbara, Wallington, Timothy J., Wang, Qing-Wei, Wängberg, Sten-Åke, White, Christopher C., Young, Antony R., Zepp, Richard G. and Zhu, Liping (2024) Environmental plastics in the context of UV radiation, climate change, and the Montreal Protocol. *Global Change Biology*, 30 (4). e17279.

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Environmental plastics in the context of UV radiation, climate change, and the Montreal Protocol

Marcel A. K. Jansen¹  | Anthony L. Andrady²  | Paul W. Barnes³  |
 Rosa Busquets⁴  | Laura E. Revell⁵  | Janet F. Bornman⁶  | Pieter J. Aucamp⁷  |
 Alkiviadis F. Bais⁸  | Anastazia T. Banaszak⁹  | Germar H. Bernhard¹⁰  |
 Laura S. Bruckman¹¹  | Donat-P. Häder¹²  | Mark L. Hanson¹³  | Anu M. Heikkilä¹⁴  |
 Samuel Hylander¹⁵  | Robyn M. Lucas¹⁶  | Roy Mackenzie^{17,18,19}  |
 Sasha Madronich²⁰  | Patrick J. Neale²¹  | Rachel E. Neale^{22,23}  |
 Catherine M. Olsen^{22,24}  | Rachele Ossola²⁵  | Krishna K. Pandey²⁶  |
 Irina Petropavlovskikh^{27,28}  | Sharon A. Robinson^{29,30}  | T. Matthew Robson^{31,32}  |
 Kevin C. Rose³³  | Keith R. Solomon³⁴  | Mads P. Sulbæk Andersen^{35,36}  |
 Barbara Sulzberger³⁷  | Timothy J. Wallington³⁸  | Qing-Wei Wang³⁹  |
 Sten-Åke Wängberg⁴⁰  | Christopher C. White⁴¹  | Antony R. Young⁴²  |
 Richard G. Zepp⁴³  | Liping Zhu⁴⁴ 

Correspondence

Marcel A. K. Jansen, School of Biological, Earth and Environmental Sciences, Environmental Research Institute, University College, Cork, Ireland.
 Email: m.jansen@ucc.ie

UV radiation, climate change, and plastic pollution are closely inter-linked. Existing studies on the persistence of plastics do not fully consider these linkages, challenging global assessments of plastic dispersal, persistence, and weathering. Recently, an Intergovernmental Negotiating Committee was tasked with developing an international binding agreement to end plastic pollution. In response, the UNEP Environmental Effects Assessment Panel assessed effects of UV radiation and interacting climate change factors on plastics, focusing on the durability of products as well as the production and dispersal of micro- and nano-plastic pollutants in the environment.

1 | PLASTIC POLLUTION

Annual global production of plastics was estimated at 400 million metric tonnes in 2022 (Plastics Europe, 2023). A substantial fraction of these plastics ultimately ends up in the natural environment as unmanaged and ubiquitous contaminants. Plastics are highly diverse in composition and properties. Further, their formulations typically include additives, such as dyes, flame retardants, and plasticizers,

resulting in variations in chemical composition, functional and structural properties, and persistence in the environment. The environmental accumulation of plastics has led to concerns about the effects of macro- (>5 mm), micro- (<5 mm), and nano- (<0.1 µm) plastics on the health of humans and other organisms. Consequently, there is a need to better understand the environmental fate of plastic debris and especially its degradation and fragmentation into micro- and nanoplastics that can be inhaled or ingested (Abdolahpur Monikh et al., 2023).

2 | SOLAR UV RADIATION AND PLASTIC DEGRADATION

Solar UV radiation drives free-radical mediated photo-oxidation reactions that render plastics brittle and can lead to fragmentation following exposure to mechanical forces (Jansen et al., 2024) (Figure 1). Naturally occurring dissolved organic matter can further facilitate the degradation of plastics via the production of reactive oxygen species. Because of the larger surface to volume ratio of

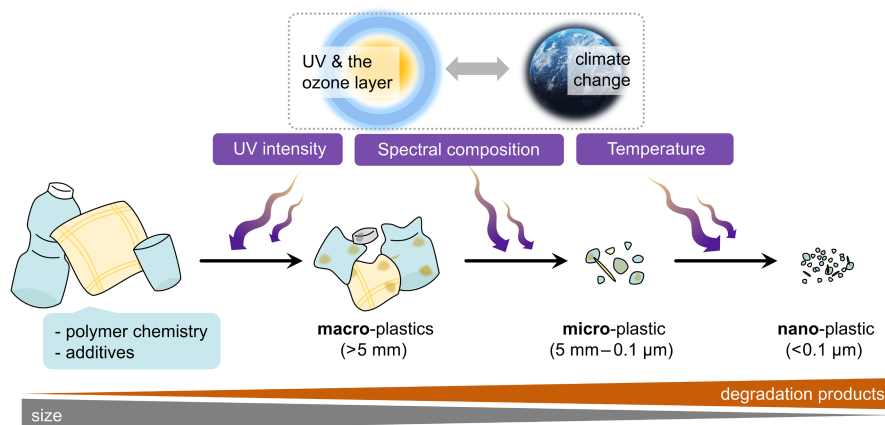


FIGURE 1 UV exposure and mechanical forces drive weathering and fragmentation of macroplastics into smaller fragments and other by-products (e.g., CO_2 , CH_4 , and leachates), in the air, on land, and in lakes, rivers, and oceans. Degradation depends on the chemical composition of the plastic polymer, UV intensity, UV spectral composition, and temperature. Reciprocal interactions between UV radiation and climate change impact photodegradation, making plastic degradation less predictable in the future (Modified from Jansen et al., 2024).

fragments, UV also accelerates the leaching of potentially toxic additives. The extent of UV-induced degradation of plastics in the environment depends on temperature and the intensity and spectral composition of solar UV radiation. Typically, UV-B wavelengths (280–315 nm) are more effective in oxidizing and embrittling common plastics compared to more prevalent UV-A (315–400 nm) or visible (400–700 nm) wavelengths (Zepp et al., 2023). Biological plastic degradation and/or fragmentation has also been reported, yet the global importance of this process remains to be demonstrated in natural environments.

3 | MONTREAL PROTOCOL, CLIMATE CHANGE, AND PLASTIC POLLUTION

The Montreal Protocol on Substances that Deplete the Ozone Layer, and its Amendments (hereafter referred to as the “Montreal Protocol”), have prevented widespread loss of stratospheric ozone and consequent increases in surface UV-B radiation. Without the Montreal Protocol, rates of UV-B-driven photodegradation of plastics, and consequent fragmentation, would have increased in recent decades. Correspondingly, the lifetime of plastic products exposed to solar radiation would have decreased (with associated economic and environmental costs), as would the persistence of macroplastic debris in the environment (Jansen et al., 2024).

In addition to protecting the biosphere from UV-B radiation, the Montreal Protocol provides climate change mitigation benefits through reduced emissions of ozone-depleting substances (ODS), many of which are also potent greenhouse gases (Velders et al., 2007). Furthermore, complex interactive effects between UV radiation and global climate change depend on factors such as consumer behavior, land-use (e.g., *increased use of evaporation-reducing plastic films*), wildfires and cloudiness (e.g.,

affecting local UV irradiance), dissolved organic matter in the water column (e.g., *affecting UV penetration and formation of reactive oxygen species*) and air and ocean currents (e.g., *affecting global plastic dispersal*). Furthermore, some feedstocks for plastic production are ODS that are currently exempted from the Montreal Protocol (Andersen et al., 2021). If these substances escape during plastic production, they potentially affect UV radiation, the global climate and hence the persistence of environmental plastic pollution. It is expected that the complex, interactive effects of UV radiation and climate change, together with changes in feedstocks, will make plastic weathering less predictable in the future.

4 | IN SUMMARY

Global effects of UV radiation and climate change on plastic debris present a double-edged sword: solar UV radiation and higher temperatures enhance the degradation of macroplastic debris but also lead to the generation of potentially hazardous micro- and nanoplastic particles. At present, the contribution of UV-driven weathering on the global load of micro- and nanoplastics cannot be reliably quantified due to a lack of data on rates of photo-oxidation and fragmentation in natural ecosystems. These rates are likely to be high for airborne plastics exposed to stronger UV irradiances, moderate for plastics on soil and near water surfaces, and low for plastics deeper in the water column or buried in soil where photodegradation will not occur due to the absence of UV. Future estimates of plastic persistence in the environment need to be based on existing projections of global UV radiation levels, and growing knowledge of dispersal of plastic around the globe. Such assessments will also inform the design and use of new plastics with durability matching the functional life of products, and that will mineralize into CO_2 and other gases.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

MAKJ, ALA, PWB, RB, LER, JFB: conceptualization, investigation, and writing—original draft. All other authors: conceptualization, investigation, and writing—review and editing.

AFFILIATIONS

- ¹School of Biological, Earth and Environmental Sciences, Environmental Research Institute, University College, Cork, Ireland
- ²Department of Chemical and Biomolecular Engineering, North Carolina State University, Raleigh, North Carolina, USA
- ³Department of Biological Sciences and Environment Program, Loyola University New Orleans, New Orleans, Louisiana, USA
- ⁴Chemical and Pharmaceutical Sciences, Kingston University London, Kingston upon Thames, UK
- ⁵School of Physical and Chemical Sciences, University of Canterbury, Christchurch, New Zealand
- ⁶Food Futures Institute, Murdoch University, Perth, Western Australia, Australia
- ⁷Ptersa Environmental Consultants, Pretoria, South Africa
- ⁸Laboratory of Atmospheric Physics, Aristotle University of Thessaloniki, Thessaloniki, Greece
- ⁹Unidad Académica Sistemas Arrecifales, Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, Puerto Morelos, Mexico
- ¹⁰Biospherical Instruments, Inc., San Diego, California, USA
- ¹¹Department of Materials Science and Engineering, Case Western Reserve University, Cleveland, Ohio, USA
- ¹²Friedrich-Alexander University, Möhrendorf, Germany
- ¹³Department of Environment and Geography, University of Manitoba, Winnipeg, Manitoba, Canada
- ¹⁴Finnish Meteorological Institute, Helsinki, Finland
- ¹⁵Centre for Ecology and Evolution in Microbial Model Systems, Linnaeus University, Kalmar, Sweden
- ¹⁶National Centre for Epidemiology and Population Health, College of Health and Medicine, Australian National University, Canberra, Australian Capital Territory, Australia
- ¹⁷Centro Universitario Cabo de Hornos, Universidad de Magallanes, Puerto Williams, Chile
- ¹⁸Millenium Institute Biodiversity of Antarctic and Subantarctic Ecosystems BASE, Santiago, Chile
- ¹⁹Cape Horn International Center CHIC, Puerto Williams, Chile
- ²⁰UV-B Monitoring and Research Program, Colorado State University, Fort Collins, Colorado, USA
- ²¹Smithsonian Environmental Research Center, Edgewater, Maryland, USA
- ²²Population Health Program, QIMR Berghofer Medical Research Institute, Brisbane, Queensland, Australia
- ²³School of Public Health, University of Queensland, Brisbane, Queensland, Australia
- ²⁴Frazer Institute, University of Queensland, Brisbane, Queensland, Australia
- ²⁵Department of Chemistry, Colorado State University, Fort Collins, Colorado, USA
- ²⁶Indian Academy of Wood Science, Bengaluru, India
- ²⁷Cooperative Institute for Research in Environmental Sciences, University of Colorado, Boulder, Colorado, USA
- ²⁸Ozone and Water Vapor Division, NOAA ESRL Global Monitoring Laboratory, Boulder, Colorado, USA
- ²⁹Securing Antarctica's Environmental Future, University of Wollongong, Wollongong, New South Wales, Australia
- ³⁰School of Earth, Atmospheric and Life Sciences, University of Wollongong, Wollongong, New South Wales, Australia
- ³¹UK National School of Forestry, University of Cumbria, Carlisle, UK
- ³²Organismal & Evolutionary Ecology, Viikki Plant Science Centre, Faculty of Biological & Environmental Sciences, University of Helsinki, Helsinki, Finland
- ³³Department of Biological Sciences, Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute, Troy, New York, USA
- ³⁴School of Environmental Sciences, University of Guelph, Guelph, Ontario, Canada
- ³⁵Department of Chemistry and Biochemistry, California State University

Northridge, Northridge, California, USA

³⁶Department of Chemistry, University of Copenhagen, Copenhagen, Denmark

³⁷Retired from Eawag: Swiss Federal Institute of Aquatic Science and Technology, Dübendorf, Switzerland

³⁸Center for Sustainable Systems, School for Environment and Sustainability, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, Michigan, USA

³⁹Institute of Applied Ecology, Chinese Academy of Sciences, Shenyang, China

⁴⁰Department of Marine Sciences, University of Gothenburg, Gothenburg, Sweden

⁴¹Exponent Inc., Bowie, Maryland, USA

⁴²King's College London, London, UK

⁴³ORD/CEMM, US Environmental Protection Agency, Athens, Georgia, USA

⁴⁴State Key Lab for Modification of Chemical Fibers and Polymer Materials, College of Materials Science and Engineering, Donghua University, Shanghai, China

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The views expressed in this article are those of the authors and do not necessarily represent the views or policies of the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

LER conducts collaborative research with Clinuvel Pharmaceuticals Ltd and Mitsubishi Tanabe Pharma Inc. on the development of photo-protective agents. All other authors declare no conflicts of interest.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Data sharing not applicable to this article as no datasets were generated or analysed during the current study.

ORCID

- Marcel A. K. Jansen  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2014-5859>
- Anthony L. Andradý  <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8683-9998>
- Paul W. Barnes  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5715-3679>
- Rosa Busquets  <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9033-4757>
- Laura E. Revell  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8974-7703>
- Janet F. Bornman  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4635-4301>
- Pieter J. Aucamp  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0977-9228>
- Alkiviadis F. Bais  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3899-2001>
- Anastazia T. Banaszak  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6667-3983>
- Germar H. Bernhard  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1264-0756>
- Laura S. Bruckman  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1271-1072>
- Donat-P. Häder  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4295-5660>
- Mark L. Hanson  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8725-004X>
- Anu M. Heikkilä  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1050-5673>
- Samuel Hylander  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3740-5998>
- Robyn M. Lucas  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2736-3541>
- Roy Mackenzie  <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6620-1532>
- Sasha Madronich  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0983-1313>
- Patrick J. Neale  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4047-8098>
- Rachel E. Neale  <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7162-0854>
- Catherine M. Olsen  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4483-1888>
- Rachele Ossola  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4648-5958>
- Krishna K. Pandey  <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6563-6219>
- Irina Petropavlovskikh  <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5352-1369>

Sharon A. Robinson  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7130-9617>
 T. Matthew Robson  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8631-796X>
 Kevin C. Rose  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1292-9381>
 Keith R. Solomon  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8496-6413>
 Mads P. Sulbæk Andersen  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7976-5852>
 Barbara Sulzberger  <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5475-3073>
 Timothy J. Wallington  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9810-6326>
 Qing-Wei Wang  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5169-9881>
 Sten-Åke Wängberg  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8531-1013>
 Christopher C. White  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3284-4043>
 Antony R. Young  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4163-6772>
 Richard G. Zepp  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3720-4042>
 Liping Zhu  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8601-0562>

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How to cite this article: Jansen, M. A. K., Andrady, A. L., Barnes, P. W., Busquets, R., Revell, L. E., Bornman, J. F., Aucamp, P. J., Bais, A. F., Banaszak, A. T., Bernhard, G. H., Bruckman, L. S., Häder, D.-P., Hanson, M. L., Heikkilä, A. M., Hylander, S., Lucas, R. M., Mackenzie, R., Madronich, S., Neale, P. J., ... Zhu, L. (2024). Environmental plastics in the context of UV radiation, climate change, and the Montreal Protocol. *Global Change Biology*, 30, e17279. <https://doi.org/10.1111/gcb.17279>