

Tackling Plastic Blindness: How Citizen Science Interventions Can Help

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Abstract

Citizen science campaigns represent real-world interventions to tackle societal issues. This paper focuses on “The Big Plastic Count,” a citizen science campaign with UK households, to investigate plastic consumption patterns. An attitudes survey (N = 8,130), and a natural experiment on petition signatures complement the analysis. We find that soft plastics are the most common waste. More importantly, citizens underestimated their plastic use, a phenomenon we term “plastic blindness,” especially in grocery deliveries. Making plastic use salient for citizens heightened concern about plastic waste and increased support for reuse/refill systems, a desirable complement to recycling. The campaign also spurred a rise in petition signatures urging the UK government to advocate for stronger global policies at the Global Plastics Treaty. These findings suggest policymakers should recognize recycling's limits, foster reuse/refill innovations, and support global regulations on plastic production.

Keywords: citizen science, plastic use, plastic policy

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