IELTS Listening Lesson 28

Setting:
You will hear a university professor giving a lecture to environmental science students about the topic of plastic waste and environmental policy.

Questions 1–6

Complete the sentences below.
Write NO MORE THAN TWO WORDS AND/OR A NUMBER for each answer.

1. Around _____ tons of plastic are produced globally each year.
2. The Great Pacific Garbage Patch mainly consists of _____.
3. Ireland reduced plastic bag use by over 90% after introducing a _____.
4. Extended Producer Responsibility laws make companies responsible for their products' _____.
5. The circular economy model promotes _____ instead of disposal.
6. Many biodegradable plastics need _____ to decompose properly.

Questions 7–10

Choose the correct letter, A, B, or C.

7. What is one limitation of bioplastics mentioned in the lecture?
   A. They are too expensive to produce

B. They do not break down in oceans or landfills

C. They release more toxins than regular plastics

8. Why was the Basel Convention amended in 2019?

A. To regulate the use of plastic in food packaging

B. To ban the use of all plastic in international trade

C. To control the export of plastic waste

9. According to the speaker, what is a major challenge in implementing policies in developing countries?

A. Lack of public awareness

B. Poor enforcement and infrastructure

C. Limited recycling markets

10. What main idea does the speaker emphasize at the end of the lecture?

A. Plastic use will always be necessary

B. Consumer behavior is the only factor that needs to change

C. A comprehensive approach is needed to solve the plastic problem

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Script

Good morning, everyone. Today, we're going to explore a subject that continues to shape public debate, scientific research, and international policy: plastic waste and environmental policy. As we all know, plastic has become a defining material of the modern era—cheap, durable, and incredibly versatile. But as useful as it is, it comes with serious environmental consequences.

Let's begin by considering the scale of plastic production. Globally, we produce over 400 million tons of plastic every year, and unfortunately, nearly half of that is intended for single-use purposes—items like plastic bags, food wrappers, and drink bottles. Now, while plastic itself isn't inherently harmful, it becomes problematic when it enters the natural environment and breaks down into microplastics, contaminating water, soil, and even the air we breathe.

A large portion of this waste ends up in the oceans. You've probably heard of the Great Pacific Garbage Patch—it's not a solid island of trash, but a massive accumulation of microplastics and debris trapped by ocean currents. Marine animals often mistake these particles for food, which leads to serious health problems or death. Some plastics also release toxic chemicals, which accumulate in the food chain and can eventually reach human consumers.

So, given this growing problem, what are governments and organizations doing in response?

Let's look at environmental policies aimed at plastic reduction. Many countries have implemented plastic bag bans or levies. For example, Ireland introduced a tax on plastic bags in 2002, and within weeks, usage

dropped by over 90 percent. Other nations, such as Kenya and Rwanda, have gone further by enforcing total bans with significant fines for violations.

Now, these are examples of market-based instruments—essentially tools that create incentives or disincentives for certain behaviors. Taxes on single-use plastics fall into this category. The idea is to internalize the environmental costs of plastic use. In other words, instead of society bearing the cleanup costs, consumers and producers are encouraged to take responsibility.

But taxes and bans alone aren't enough. Extended Producer Responsibility, or EPR, is another critical policy tool. EPR laws require manufacturers to manage the disposal or recycling of their products after consumer use. In the European Union, for instance, packaging companies must fund recycling programs and meet specific targets for material recovery. This helps shift the focus from waste management to product design, encouraging the use of materials that are easier to recycle or reuse.

Another approach gaining traction is the circular economy model. Rather than the traditional linear model—take, make, dispose—the circular economy promotes designing products for reuse, repair, and recycling. Plastics, in this framework, should be seen as valuable materials that remain in use for as long as possible, instead of becoming waste after a single use.

Let me pause for a second to emphasize something. While policies often focus on consumer behavior—like avoiding plastic straws or using reusable bags—industry transformation is equally, if not more, important.

Large-scale change requires investment in new manufacturing processes, packaging alternatives, and improved waste infrastructure.

Speaking of alternatives, bioplastics are often touted as a sustainable solution. These are plastics derived from renewable sources like cornstarch or sugarcane. Some are biodegradable, meaning they break down naturally under certain conditions. However, the term "biodegradable" can be misleading. Many of these materials require industrial composting facilities and won't degrade properly in the ocean or in landfills. Plus, growing crops for bioplastics can compete with food production and involve pesticide use, so it's not a perfect fix.

Let's also touch briefly on international agreements. While there's no global treaty specifically targeting plastic waste, there have been movements in that direction. The Basel Convention, for instance, was amended in 2019 to include certain types of plastic waste, requiring exporters to gain consent from receiving countries before shipment. This was, in part, a response to the 2018 decision by China to stop importing plastic waste from other nations—a decision that disrupted the global recycling trade and forced countries to deal with their own waste more directly.

Education and awareness campaigns also play a key role. Many governments fund programs in schools and communities to encourage better sorting of recyclables and reduce contamination in recycling streams. Even small improvements here can significantly boost recycling rates.

Of course, all of these policies face challenges. For one, there's the issue of enforcement—especially in developing countries where waste management infrastructure is limited. Even where laws exist, illegal

dumping or burning of plastic is still common. Additionally, lobbying by plastic manufacturers can slow the adoption of stronger regulations. Economic arguments—such as potential job losses or impacts on small businesses—are frequently used to resist change.

So, where does that leave us?

Well, the reality is that there's no single solution to the plastic waste problem. Instead, it requires a multi-pronged approach. Policy, innovation, public behavior, and international cooperation must all work together. We must reduce the demand for unnecessary plastics, redesign products for sustainability, and improve the ways we manage waste at both local and global levels.

In closing, I want to leave you with this thought: tackling plastic waste isn't just about managing a material—it's about rethinking systems. How we produce, consume, and dispose of goods reflects broader values in our society. Changing that system will take time, but with effective environmental policies and strong public support, we can make meaningful progress.

Alright, that's all for today's session. In our next lecture, we'll look at case studies of cities that have successfully reduced plastic consumption—so please read the assigned chapters on municipal waste management before then.

Thank you.

Answer Key

1. 400 million
2. microplastics
3. tax
4. disposal
5. reuse
6. industrial composting
7. B
8. C
9. B
10. C