



Trace the number

Background reading for teachers

This reading gives you the background for each trail, with sources you can check.

The coconut trail

In 2002, the director of the International Shark Attack File was quoted saying falling coconuts kill 150 people a year. When asked, he said he had taken the figure from the internet, from a press release by the British travel insurer Club Direct.¹ No published research supports the figure.² The only related research is a 1984 paper on coconut injuries at a hospital in Papua New Guinea.

The plastic and fish trail

The claim comes from the Ellen MacArthur Foundation's 2016 report *The New Plastics Economy*, which projected 850 to 950 million tonnes of ocean plastic by 2050 against 812 to 899 million tonnes of fish. The fish figure came from a 2008 study. In 2016 a co-author, Simon Jennings, told BBC Radio 4's *More or Less* that he no longer stood by those figures. A 2015 paper he co-wrote put marine life biomass at about 4.9 billion tonnes, more than six times the report's figure.³

The plastic bottle trail

A 2020 analysis of 57 infographics on plastic lifetimes found no credible scientific source for the numbers, and all 37 that listed fishing line gave 600 years.⁴

SIFT

SIFT (Stop, Investigate the source, Find better coverage, Trace claims to the original context) is a lateral-reading method developed by Mike Caulfield and widely used in media literacy teaching.⁵

Sources

1. The Straight Dope (2002). Are 150 people killed each year by falling coconuts? straightdope.com
2. Snopes. Coconuts kill more people than sharks? snopes.com/coconuts-kill-more-sharks/
3. AAP FactCheck (2023). Fishy figures underpin minister's ocean plastic warning. aap.com.au/factcheck/fishy-figures-underpin-ministers-ocean-plastic-warning/
4. Ward, C.P. and Reddy, C.M. (2020). We need better data about the environmental persistence of plastic goods. *PNAS* 117(26): 14618-14621.
5. Caulfield, M. SIFT (the four moves). hapgood.us

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