

Ocean plastic cleanup stumbles

MARINE ECOLOGY | A high-profile trash collector designed to remove plastic from the Pacific Ocean is limping back to port after a mechanical failure. The 600-meter-long device was built by the Ocean Cleanup, a nonprofit based in Rotterdam, the Netherlands. Boyan Slat founded the group as an 18-year-old inventor, raised \$31.5 million, and hired 80 engineers and scientists. They designed a U-shaped pontoon that, pushed by wind and waves, would collect plastic with a skirt. Ships could occasionally haul the trash away. Boyan has said that a fleet of 60 such pontoon collectors could remove half of the Great Pacific Garbage Patch—a large accumulation of waste between Hawaii and California—in 5 years. But skeptics questioned the plan's feasibility and cost. In November 2018, the team discovered the prototype tested in the garbage patch was not retaining trash, perhaps because it was not moving fast enough. Then, in late December 2018, an 18-meter-long section broke off, apparently because of material fatigue. Engineers will try to repair and improve the device after it reaches Honolulu on 13 January.