PLASTIC POLLUTION THREAT TO SEABIRDS

The stomach of fledgling mutton birds, or Short-tailed Shearwaters, on Victoria’s Phillip Island have been found to contain an average of more than seven particles of plastic per bird – weighing some 113 mg.

He says the most common type of debris found in the birds was widely used plastics, followed by industrial pellets. The birds also contained a small proportion of other refuse, such as polystyrene and plastic bag.

Seabirds ingest plastic because they confuse it with prey, says Dr Carey. ‘It can cause physical damage, or perforation, mechanical blockage or impairment of the digestive system, resulting in starvation. Some plastics are also a source of toxic pollutants released during digestion.’

Dr Carey says chicks appear to be at greater risk than adult birds. ‘When plastics are regurgitated by parents to chicks, the physical impact of the plastic and internal ulceration are likely to lower survival.

The results of the research have just been published in *Emu - Austral Ornithology*, the leading scientific journal for ornithological research in the Southern Hemisphere and presented by Dr Carey to an international audience at the Australasian Ornithological Conference in Cairns.

Dr Carey, from the Department of Environmental Management and Ecology on La Trobe’s Albury-Wodonga campus, says pollution of the world’s oceans affects a wide variety of marine organisms and raises major conservation concerns.

‘Ingestion of plastic debris has increased since the 1970s, particularly among birds that roam long distances like petrels and albatrosses, resulting in lethal and sub-lethal side effects.’

Further information on research opportunities in the Department of Environmental Management and Ecology can be found at: latrobe.edu.au/deme/research.html