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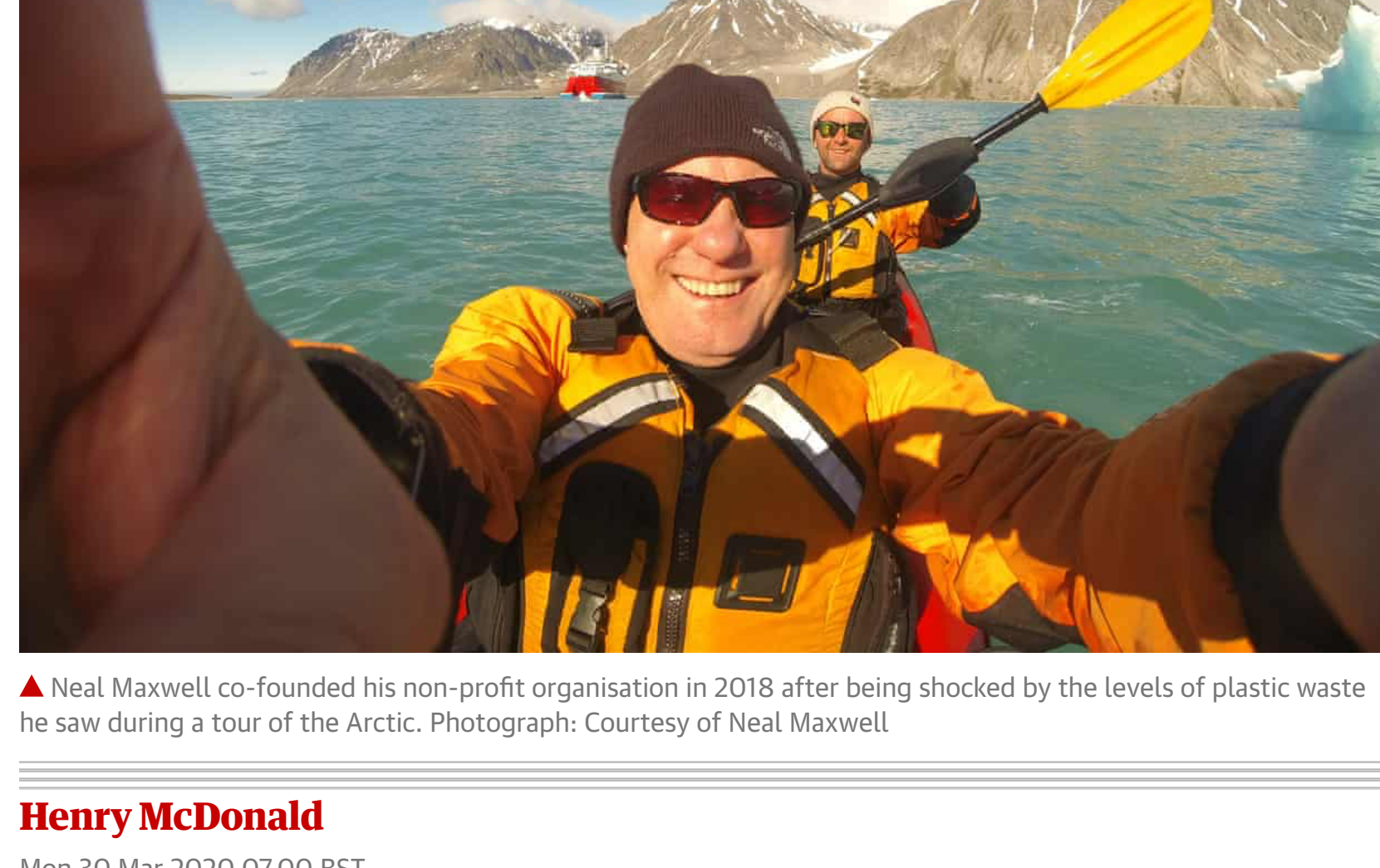
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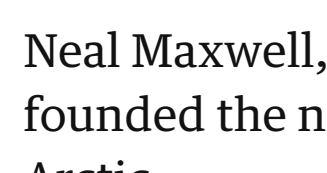
Builder aims to help UK construction industry kick its plastic habit

Neal Maxwell wants trade to go from 50,000 tonnes of plastic waste each year to zero by 2040



Neal Maxwell co-founded his non-profit organisation in 2018 after being shocked by the levels of plastic waste he saw during a tour of the Arctic. Photograph: Courtesy of Neal Maxwell

Henry McDonald Mon 30 Mar 2020 07:00 BST



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A builder from Merseyside has launched a project that aims to remove plastic from the British construction industry within two decades.

Neal Maxwell, who has worked in the trade for more than 30 years, co-founded the non-profit organisation Changing Streams after a trip to the Arctic.

Appalled by the levels of plastic pollutants in the Arctic Ocean and the often-lethal impact on animals in the polar region, Maxwell and researchers from the University of Liverpool have drawn up a programme that they say could make construction plastic-free by 2040.

The sector is the second largest producer of plastic waste in the UK, after packaging. It is estimated the building trade generates 50,000 tonnes of plastic waste each year.

Along with the architect Dr Gareth Abrahams from the university's School of Environmental Science, Maxwell has drafted a charter that they hope could become legally binding.

The programme for the construction industry includes:

- the phasing out of paint containing plastic;
the establishment of a "traffic light" guide to warn which paints contain plastic to dissuade DIY consumers from buying them;
the creation of a template house made without plastic;
the end of the use of plastic wrapping for building materials such as bricks and cladding.

Maxwell co-founded Changing Streams in 2018 after he and his wife toured the Arctic on a scientific exploration ship. He said: "On board were 20 scientific specialists from all around the world who helped us understand about the environment and the impact global warming and plastic pollution was having.



"We were told about the walruses while out in kayaks and learned about their feeding habits and plastic ingestion via clams when in the water. But the moment of truth for me came when we got back to England, when I went on our first food shop at the supermarket to stock up the kitchen again. When I saw row upon row of things covered in plastic it turned my stomach - I had to get out of the shop.

"When I got home I realised I had to do something about plastic pollution. And I could only do that in the industry I've worked in for over 30 years. That trip and that moment in the supermarket afterwards convinced me that I should try to make my industry plastic-free."

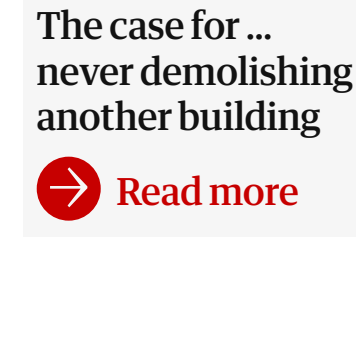


Maxwell's Arctic expedition. Photograph: Courtesy of Neal Maxwell

Maxwell said he was even more shocked when he discovered how much plastic was used in the construction business.

He and Abrahams hope a "carrot and stick" approach can win over builders, many of whom fear replacing plastic will raise their costs.

"We will not only ask government eventually to adopt this as legally binding regulations, but also petition large pension fund providers which finance construction to adopt the charter as well," Maxwell said.



The case for... never demolishing another building

Abrahams says the University of Liverpool aims to construct plastic-free accommodation on its campus, which is undergoing a multimillion-pound rebuild.

He said: "One of our projects is to create the first ever plastic-neutral commercially viable house. We want to show the building industry this can be done. And through things like coding paint we can hopefully change consumer behaviour as well."

Maxwell says plastic became widely used in the late 1950s and 60s. "What did we do before [it] was ubiquitous? Pre-plastic, we built houses, factories, offices and buildings without it. We don't have to reinvent the wheel here. There are alternatives we have used before and new ones we can invent.

"We used to use asbestos throughout our industry before we knew the damage it was doing to our lungs. We know the damage plastic is doing to our planet and other species. Shouldn't we treat plastic as the new asbestos?"

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Topics: Plastic free, Pollution, Oceans, Arctic, Construction industry, Liverpool, news



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