# Mass removal of wet wipes from Thames highlights urgent need for legislation and behavioural change



Approximately five million wet wipes, amounting to 114 tonnes of waste, have been successfully removed from the River Thames in a remarkable cleanup effort near Hammersmith Bridge in west London. This project targeted an area known locally as 'Wet Wipe Island'—an expansive accumulation of wet wipes and other debris spanning about 820 feet along the riverbank, roughly the size of two tennis courts and reaching depths up to one metre. The island had been reshaping the river’s course and posing significant threats to aquatic wildlife and the river's ecological balance. The clean-up, which lasted three weeks, employed two eight-tonne excavators using a "rake and shake" technique to extract the wet wipes embedded in the river sediment. The waste collected included not just wipes but also unexpected items like towels, scarves, trousers, a car’s engine timing belt, and even false teeth. Nearly 200 cubic metres of wet wipes containing plastics were removed and sent to landfill, marking the UK's first mass wet wipe removal operation of its kind.

The initiative was led by the Port of London Authority (PLA) alongside environmental charity Thames21 and Thames Water. Thames21 had campaigned tirelessly for years to address the issue, monitoring the site since 2017 and gathering data that underscored the environmental damage caused by wet wipes containing plastic. The organisation has highlighted that many flushed wet wipes do not biodegrade like tissue paper because of their plastic content, leading to these accumulations on river foreshores after sewage overflow incidents. Nationally, approximately 11 billion disposable wipes are sold annually, with an estimated 2.5 billion wrongly flushed, contributing extensively to river pollution and associated ecological harm.

This recent operation is part of a broader strategy to improve the health of the River Thames and reduce pollution, aligned with the PLA’s Clean Thames Manifesto aiming for a cleaner, pollution-free river with a robust ecosystem by 2050. Thames Water has also committed substantial investment, announcing a £1.8 billion plan to enhance river health in London and connecting the £4.6 billion Thames Tideway Tunnel project to cut sewage discharges into the tidal Thames by 95%. Despite these efforts, the persistence of wet wipe pollution underscores the ongoing challenges in managing sewage infrastructure and public waste disposal practices.

The environmental impact of plastic-containing wet wipes extends beyond visible debris. Research indicates that wet wipes break down very slowly, eventually fragmenting into microplastics that infiltrate aquatic ecosystems. Studies cited by Thames21 reveal alarmingly high levels of microplastics in the Thames, with species such as mitten crabs and European flounder found to have ingested plastic fibres. These pollutants disrupt wildlife health and contribute to the broader global microplastic problem, affecting food chains and ecosystem resilience.

Against this backdrop, the UK government has been urged to implement legislative measures to ban the sale of plastic-containing wet wipes. After several years of campaigning by Thames21 and other groups, draft legislation was published earlier in the year, although the precise timetable for enforcement remains awaited. Thames21's chief executive Chris Coode has emphasised the critical need for urgent government action, coupled with industry responsibility to develop plastic-free alternatives, and infrastructure upgrades by water companies to reduce sewage overflow incidents. The charity also stresses the vital role of consumers in correctly disposing of wet wipes by placing them in bins rather than flushing them to prevent blockages and environmental harm.

Grace Rawnsley, director of sustainability at the Port of London Authority, expressed relief and satisfaction at the project's completion, noting the widespread public support and the importance of reinvesting in river health initiatives. She acknowledged the sometimes unpleasant nature of the cleanup but affirmed its significance in restoring the river environment. This milestone highlights a growing recognition of the damage caused by everyday items like wet wipes, fostering momentum for regulatory and behavioural change needed to protect the Thames and other waterways from similar pollution challenges in the future.

### 📌 Reference Map:

* Paragraph 1 – [[1]](https://www.express.co.uk/news/uk/2107502/wet-wipe-island-cleared-river-thames), [[2]](https://www.thameswater.co.uk/news/2025/aug/wet-wipe-island-removal)
* Paragraph 2 – [[1]](https://www.express.co.uk/news/uk/2107502/wet-wipe-island-cleared-river-thames), [[2]](https://www.thameswater.co.uk/news/2025/aug/wet-wipe-island-removal), [[3]](https://www.thames21.org.uk/joinacampaign/taking-action-against-plastic-in-wet-wipes-to-protect-our-rivers/)
* Paragraph 3 – [[2]](https://www.thameswater.co.uk/news/2025/aug/wet-wipe-island-removal), [[3]](https://www.thames21.org.uk/joinacampaign/taking-action-against-plastic-in-wet-wipes-to-protect-our-rivers/), [[5]](https://www.thames21.org.uk/2023/09/the-plastic-wet-wipes-issue-explained/)
* Paragraph 4 – [[2]](https://www.thameswater.co.uk/news/2025/aug/wet-wipe-island-removal), [[3]](https://www.thames21.org.uk/joinacampaign/taking-action-against-plastic-in-wet-wipes-to-protect-our-rivers/), [[5]](https://www.thames21.org.uk/2023/09/the-plastic-wet-wipes-issue-explained/), [[6]](https://www.thames21.org.uk/2025/04/thames21-reiterates-call-for-government-to-speed-up-introduction-of-legislation-to-ban-plastic-in-wet-wipes/)
* Paragraph 5 – [[1]](https://www.express.co.uk/news/uk/2107502/wet-wipe-island-cleared-river-thames), [[3]](https://www.thames21.org.uk/joinacampaign/taking-action-against-plastic-in-wet-wipes-to-protect-our-rivers/), [[4]](https://www.thames21.org.uk/2024/04/thames21-welcomes-governments-plan-to-ban-plastic-in-wet-wipes/), [[6]](https://www.thames21.org.uk/2025/04/thames21-reiterates-call-for-government-to-speed-up-introduction-of-legislation-to-ban-plastic-in-wet-wipes/)

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## Bibliography

1. <https://www.express.co.uk/news/uk/2107502/wet-wipe-island-cleared-river-thames> - Please view link - unable to able to access data
2. <https://www.thameswater.co.uk/news/2025/aug/wet-wipe-island-removal> - Thames Water, in collaboration with the Port of London Authority (PLA), initiated the UK's first large-scale wet wipe removal project in August 2025. The operation aimed to extract approximately 180 tonnes of congealed wet wipes from a 250-metre stretch of the River Thames near Hammersmith Bridge. This effort was prompted by the formation of 'Wet Wipe Island', an accumulation of wet wipes that had altered the river's course and posed environmental risks. The project was expected to take up to a month to complete, with the wet wipes being removed using mechanical excavators during low tide and disposed of responsibly. Environmental charity Thames21 had been monitoring the site since 2017, collecting over 140,000 wet wipes and advocating for the clean-up. The initiative was part of a broader effort to improve river health in the Thames, with the PLA's Clean Thames Manifesto coordinating actions towards a cleaner, pollution-free river with a healthy ecosystem by 2050. Thames Water had also announced a £1.8 billion investment to enhance river health across London and had connected its £4.6 billion Thames Tideway Tunnel to reduce sewage discharges into the tidal Thames by 95%.
3. <https://www.thames21.org.uk/joinacampaign/taking-action-against-plastic-in-wet-wipes-to-protect-our-rivers/> - Thames21, an environmental charity, has been actively campaigning against the environmental impact of plastic in wet wipes. They highlight that of the 11 billion disposable wipes sold annually in Britain, an estimated 2.5 billion are wrongly flushed down toilets. The majority of these wipes contain plastics that do not break down like tissue paper, leading to accumulation on river foreshores after sewage overflows. Over a six-year period (2017-2023), Thames21 collected more than 135,000 wet wipes from the Thames foreshore. The charity advocates for a ban on the sale of all wet wipes containing plastic, urging manufacturers to develop plastic-free alternatives and for consumers to dispose of wet wipes correctly by binning them instead of flushing. They also call for water companies to invest in sewage infrastructure to prevent wet wipes from entering the environment and for the government to prioritize legislation banning plastic in wet wipes.
4. <https://www.thames21.org.uk/2024/04/thames21-welcomes-governments-plan-to-ban-plastic-in-wet-wipes/> - In April 2024, Thames21 welcomed the UK government's plan to ban the sale of wet wipes containing plastic, viewing it as a significant victory for the health of the River Thames, its wildlife, and people. The charity had been campaigning for this ban for many years, working with volunteers to gather evidence, engage with the media, and collaborate with partners to push for change. Sewage-based wet wipes made with plastic fibres enter the river through sewage pipes after being flushed down toilets. As they don't break down like tissue paper, they accumulate on river foreshores after sewage overflows, forming 'wet wipe islands' that negatively impact wildlife and people. Studies have shown that many fish in the river have plastic fibres clogging up their digestive systems. Thames21 CEO Chris Coode emphasized the importance of this ban in protecting the river's health and called for manufacturers to create plastic-free alternatives, water companies to invest in sewage infrastructure to reduce reliance on sewage overflows, and consumers to dispose of non-plastic-based wet wipes correctly by binning them instead of flushing.
5. <https://www.thames21.org.uk/2023/09/the-plastic-wet-wipes-issue-explained/> - Thames21 provides an explanation of the environmental issues caused by plastic in wet wipes. Sewage-based wet wipes end up in the River Thames after being flushed down toilets, with many containing plastic fibres that prevent them from biodegrading. These wipes accumulate on the river's foreshores, forming 'wet wipe islands' that change the river's shape and eventually break down into microplastics, harming aquatic life and the ecosystem. The Thames has some of the highest recorded levels of microplastics for any river globally. A 2020 study found that 95% of mitten crabs examined had plastic in their stomachs, and 75% of sampled European flounder had fibres in their guts. Since 2017, Thames21 has been tracking wet wipes in the Thames' foreshore, with River Action Groups and citizen scientists collecting over 137,000 wipes across 94 clean-up events in London. The charity urges for a ban on plastic in wet wipes to protect the river and its wildlife.
6. <https://www.thames21.org.uk/2025/04/thames21-reiterates-call-for-government-to-speed-up-introduction-of-legislation-to-ban-plastic-in-wet-wipes/> - In April 2025, Thames21 reiterated its call for the UK government to swiftly announce a date for introducing legislation to ban plastic in wet wipes to prevent them from entering the River Thames and its tributaries. The previous government had announced plans to introduce such legislation in April, but the current government had not set a timetable. Wet wipes, when flushed down toilets, cause blockages and lead to sewage spills. Many contain plastic fibres that prevent biodegradation, accumulating on slow-moving parts of rivers and creating artificial islands that harm wildlife and water quality. Wet wipes containing plastic can take many years to biodegrade, breaking down into microplastics that are ingested by wildlife, spreading across the food chain and harming entire ecosystems. Thames21 CEO Chris Coode emphasized the urgency of the issue and called for multi-stakeholder action to improve the state of freshwater ecosystems, including manufacturers developing sustainable plastic-free alternatives, water companies investing in upgrading sewage infrastructure, and consumers disposing of waste correctly by binning non-plastic-based wet wipes instead of flushing them.