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Microplastic Ingestion by Deep-Pelagic Crustaceans and Fishes

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Author Contributions: R. P. B., T. M. F., and T. T. S. conceptualized the research; T. M. F. and T. T. S. collected samples; R. P. B. and S. Z. processed the samples; R. P. B. processed the data; R. P. B. and T. M. F. analyzed the data. R. P. B. wrote the first draft of the manuscript. All authors edited and approved the final version of the manuscript.

Keywords: deep-pelagic | diel vertical migration | ingestion | marine snow | microplastics

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Abstract

to avoid airborne contamination included processing samples in a HEPA filtration hood in the Microbial Genomics Laboratory and wearing non-plastic clothing coupled with a 100% cotton laboratory coat (Enders et al. 2015; Lusher et al. 2015; Zhao et al. 2017). Flamed forceps and surgical tools were used to directly handle all samples. Process blanks served as internal controls and were examined at the end of each dissection series under a dissecting microscope for potential contamination. Procedural blanks were processed in the same manner that all samples were processed: 1) digestion; 2) visual inspection of filters; and 3) hot-needle test on particles on filter to confirm presence of plastic.

The excised stomachs were placed individually into sterile, flamed (inverted and held over a flame for five minutes) borosilicate glass vials, covered with aluminum foil, and digested using one of two digestive solutions. Fish stomachs were digested using 1:1 KOH:NaClO following protocols described by Enders et al. (2017). While Enders et al. (2017) suggested that the proposed basic digestion could be effective at digesting flocculent, biogenic materials, results from the present study demonstrated that this basic digestion was inefficient for digesting crustacean stomach contents. The products of basic digestion resulted in a greasy slurry, which made it challenging to sort through for microplastics. For this reason, crustacean stomachs were digested with a 4:1 nitric (70%) and perchloric acid (70%) solution in individual borosilicate vials following protocols described in De Witte et al. (2014). Tissues were left to digest overnight in the HEPA filtration hood. The digestive solution inside the glass vials was then diluted with type I ultrapure water, and heated (>80 ℃) for 10 minutes. The products of acid and basic digestion were filtered through a 0.7-µm Whatman GF/F glass microfiber filter in the HEPA filtration hood and prepared for polymer identification. All specimens were individually

processed except for the two euphausiid species *Nematobranchion boopis* and *Thysanopoda acutifrons*, which were batch processed due to their small size.

Polymer Identification

Particles that withstood digestion were photographed using a camera (Canon DS126571) mounted on a stereomicroscope (Meiji Techno). Along with visual identification, these particles were subsequently subjected to the 'hot-needle' or 'burn' test to determine if they were plastic. Upon being probed with a hot needle, plastic fragments stick to the needle, and the needle may leave a burn mark or slight charring on the plastic. In the case of fibers, these plastics are repelled by the needle, begin to curl up, and in some cases melt (Devriese et al. 2015; Karlsson et al. 2017; Lusher et al. 2017). Chitinous material, which can be visually confused with plastic, did not exhibit any sign of charring or melting when probed with a hot needle. Images of particles that were verified to be plastic particles were uploaded into the free software *ImageJ* for analysis of dimensions (Schneider et al. 2012).

A random subsample of 25 ingested polymers was chosen for chemical identification by an FTIR Spectroscopy instrument (Thermo Scientific, Nicolet iN10MX, USA) using Attenuated Total Reflectance in the spectral range of 3600-1200 cm^{-1}. All identifications were done in a HEPA filtration hood in the Marine Plastic and Pollutants Laboratory at Harbor Branch Oceanographic Institute. The Hummel Polymer Sample Library, available in OMNIC Picta (Thermo Scientific), was used for chemically identifying ingested polymer particles. Spectra were preprocessed with auto baseline correction and normalization, followed by atmospheric peak removal. Predicted chemical identities based on software interpretation were validated (>60% match with reference spectra) or rejected (<60% match with reference spectra, with absence of clear diagnostic

polymer peaks). Chemical spectra between 50-60% match similarity were reevaluated as being a potential plastic polymer by spectral interpretation (i.e., the presence of diagnostic polymer peaks), and were considered to be a plastic polymer if the presence of diagnostic polymer peaks was confirmed. Thin ingested fibers were difficult to identify using transmission mode, so for some fibers, spectra were collected using reflectance mode with a gold-plated slide (Brahney et al. 2020).

Data Analysis

Microplastic ingestion was quantified separately for crustaceans and fishes for each depth range and solar cycle (day, night). The mean proportion of microplastic ingestion for each species was calculated as the number of individuals containing plastic divided by the total number of processed individuals for that species. The proportion of plastic ingestion between depth intervals and number of individuals that ingested plastic based on their migration pattern was compared using Chi-squared frequency analysis or Fisher's exact test.

Results

Contamination Controls

After visual inspection of the process blanks, only one out of 38 total control filters possessed contamination (three small clear fibers), so the samples associated with this filter were excluded from analyses. Airborne microplastic contamination was considered negligible as contamination was not observed on 97.3% of process blanks. While polyamide 6.6 was identified in our samples, no identified polymers resembled the color of the 3-mm nylon mesh used for sampling, so net feeding of plastics was also considered negligible.

Characteristics of Ingested Polymers

Crustaceans collectively ingested 128 plastic particles, whereas 95 plastic particles were consumed by fishes. The most abundant colors of microplastics were blue (37%), red (17%), clear (12%), black (9%), and other (24%). The ingested microplastic particles ranged in size from 0.27 mm to 3.97 mm, with an average size of 0.59 mm ± 0.2 mm. The composition of ingested microplastics was 69% fibers (n = 154) and 31% fragments (n = 69; Figure 2A). In terms of length, 78% of microplastics were less than 1 mm along their longest dimension, and this category was chiefly composed of fibers. The 1.01-2.00 mm category encompassed 15.6% of the microplastics and was composed mainly of fragments (57%). The 2.01-3.00 mm category accounted for 4.4% of all particles and was made up of only fragments, and the least prevalent size class was the larger size class (3.01- 4.00 mm), composed of only four fragments (1.7% of all plastics). No particles were found in the 4.01-5.00 length category. Crustaceans consumed predominantly fibers (78%), whereas fishes ingested a slightly higher percentage of fragments relative to fibers (54%, Figure 2B). Examples of chemically identified fibers and fragments found in the present study are displayed in Figure 3.

Of the 25 particles randomly chosen for chemical identification (>10% of all particles detected), 100% of the particles were confirmed to be plastic polymers (Table 1). In total, nine distinct polymer types were identified, with the four most abundant polymers being cellophane (n = 8), alkyd resin (n = 3), polyethylene-polypropylene copolymer (n = 3), and polyethyl acrylate acrylamide copolymer (n = 3).

Assessment of Microplastic Ingestion

A total of 557 individuals (300 crustaceans and 257 fishes) from a combined 35 species and 9 families were assessed for microplastic ingestion (Tables 2-3). Of the crustacean species analyzed, 12 species are vertical migrators while five species are non-migrators, whereas for the fishes, 13 species are vertical migrators, and five species are not. At least one microplastic particle was found in the digestive tract of 29% and 26% of crustaceans and fishes collected from the Gulf of Mexico, respectively. As the migratory euphausiids *Nematobranchion boopis* and *Thysanopoda acutifrons* individuals were batch digested, they were excluded from Table 2. Of 22 *N. boopis* individuals, no microplastics were found on filters after digestion and filtration, whereas 15 microplastics were isolated from *T. acutifrons* (n = 96).

Vertical Migration and Microplastic Ingestion

There was no observed difference in the mean plastic-positive proportion of crustaceans and fishes collected during daytime (0.29) vs. nighttime (0.28, Figure 4A). After disaggregating crustacean and fish taxa, the mean proportion of crustaceans that ingested microplastics was slightly higher during the day (0.32) than at night (0.26), but this difference was not statistically significant (Chi-squared, $p = 0.320$, Figure 4B). For the fishes, a slightly higher mean proportion of individuals ingested plastic at night (0.29) than during the day (0.24), but again, this difference was not statistically significant (Chi-squared, $p = 0.235$, Figure 4B).

Vertically migrating taxa of fishes had a higher mean proportion of individuals that ingested microplastics (0.28) than non-migratory taxa (0.23), but these differences were not statistically

significant (Chi-squared, p = 0.270, Figure 4C). The opposite was true for crustaceans, where non-migratory taxa had a significantly higher mean proportion of individuals ingesting microplastics (0.37) than migratory taxa (0.23, Chi-squared, p = 0.0120, Figure 4C).

Microplastic Ingestion with Depth

When grouping crustacean and fish taxa together, the highest mean proportion of individuals containing plastic was found at depths of 600-1000 m both during the day and at night. The mean proportion of plastic-positive specimens decreased to its lowest frequency between depths of 1000-1200 m and was highest at depths of 1200-1500 m (Figure 5A).

The mean proportion of migratory crustacean taxa that ingested microplastics was relatively consistent, ranging between 0.24-0.28 across nearly all depths, except for depths of 1000-1200 m where the lowest mean proportion (0.08) of migrators containing plastic was found (Figure 5B). The proportion of non-migratory crustacean taxa containing microplastics was also consistent, fluctuating narrowly between 0.33-0.35, except for depths of 600-1000 m where the highest mean proportion of individuals ingesting microplastics (0.44) was found. When comparing migratory and non-migratory crustacean taxa, significantly more non-migrators contained microplastics at all depths where comparisons were possible. The largest difference was observed at depths of 1000-1200 m, and this depth range had the lowest mean proportion of individuals ingesting microplastics for both taxa groupings (Figure 5B).

The mean proportion of individuals of migratory fish taxa that ingested microplastics was inconsistent across depths, with no apparent trend (Figure 5B), while the proportion of

non-migratory fish taxa ingesting microplastics appeared to progressively increase with depth, with the highest frequency of ingestion occurring at depths of 1200-1500 m (Figure 5B). Like the migratory crustaceans, migratory fish taxa had the highest mean proportion of individuals with microplastics at depths of 600-1000 m and the lowest proportion at depths of 1000-1200, while the non-migratory fish taxa exhibited the highest and lowest mean proportions of individuals containing microplastics at depths of 1200-1500 m and 600-1000 m, respectively.

Discussion

This is the first assessment of microplastic ingestion for deep-pelagic crustaceans and fishes in the Gulf of Mexico. Data collected in this study demonstrate the presence of microplastics in 29% of crustaceans and 26% of fishes and expand our understanding of the fate of smaller microplastics (<1 mm) with comparisons between migratory and non-migratory crustaceans and fishes from meso- and bathypelagic depths (Figure 3 and Tables 2 and 3). Visual identification, paired with the hot-needle test, although rapid and cost-effective, is only viable with plastic particles that are greater than ~250 microns in length (De Witte et al. 2014; Devriese et al. 2015; Vandermeersch et al. 2015; Bellas et al. 2016; Kapp and Yeatman, 2018). Consequently, the two-step polymer verification process used to identify microplastics herein (hot-needle test followed by FTIR) likely underrepresents the smallest size fractions of microplastics (<200 micron) that have been reported to be highly abundant in mesopelagic fishes (Wieczorek et al. 2018). Moreover, although still used as a viable plastic extraction technique, the acidic digestion used for digestion of recalcitrant crustacean stomachs could degrade plastic particles and misrepresent the true extent of microplastic ingestion in crustaceans. Therefore, our estimates for microplastic ingestion in the present study should be considered conservative, as the smallest

particle reported here was 270 µm, and it is reasonable to hypothesize that the extent of microplastic ingestion is substantially higher than the values we report.

Chemical Identification of Polymers

There is a growing number of observations in the literature that suggest that negatively buoyant polymers, especially polyamides and polyesters, are predominantly consumed by deep-pelagic organisms (Courtene-Jones et al. 2017, 2019; Choy et al. 2019; Justino et al. 2022). Choy et al. (2019) hypothesized that the predominance of negatively buoyant polymers ingested by deep-pelagic organisms could mean that these dense plastics are ingested directly from the water column (see below), which have been shown to be in high abundance in deep-pelagic waters (La Daana et al. 2017; Ross et al. 2021) In the present study, greater than 60% of chemically identified polymers were theoretically negatively buoyant in seawater, and cellophane (1.42 g cm^{-3}), followed by alkyd resin (1.6 cm^{-3}), were the dominant ingested polymers (Table 1). Alkyd resin is potentially linked to the degradation and shedding of marine paints from metal ships (Song et al. 2015; Lacerda et al. 2019), as well as land-based inputs of paints via rivers (Turner et al. 2022), which may be transported to the pelagic environment. Given the prevalence of commercial fishing activities and shipping in the Gulf of Mexico, ships are a plausible sea-based source for alkyd resin in this body of water, but because of riverine inputs via the Mississippi River, coastal origins of alkyd resins cannot be discounted. Cellophane is a cellulose-based polymer that has great utility in packaging of cosmetics, foods, and textiles and is also used as a coating for synthetic polymers (Yang et al. 2015). When using FTIR spectroscopy, it is difficult to differentiate artificial and natural cellulose particles. For example, alginic acids and methyl cellulose were highly ingested by mesopelagic fishes, and this result could arise from insufficient

removal of sodium hydroxide used for removal of organic matter (Wieczorek et al. 2018). However, the authors argue that thorough cleaning of plastic particles with filtered, ultrapure water after digestions could prevent skewed absorbance spectra. After digestions in the present study, however, type 1 ultrapure water was passed through the filters containing particles, so it is not immediately clear if residual caustic solutions remained on these particles and skewed spectra, or if these particles are of anthropogenic or natural origin.

Vertical Migration and Microplastic Ingestion

An increasing number of studies have investigated microplastic ingestion by deep-pelagic fishes (Boerger et al. 2010; Davison and Asch, 2011; Choy and Drazen, 2013; Lusher et al. 2016; Wieczorek et al. 2018; Justino et al. 2022), yet few exist for midwater crustaceans (Choy et al. 2019), as previous crustacean-centric studies have focused on deep-sea benthic or benthopelagic samples (Taylor et al. 2016; Courtene-Jones et al. 2017, 2019; Carreras-Colom et al. 2018; Jamieson et al. 2019). This is the first instance of non-migratory midwater taxa, that almost always dwell deeper than 600 m, being represented in high volume, as the previous studies that did include non-migrators were characterized by small sample sizes insufficient for analyses with depth (Davison and Asch, 2011; Lusher et al. 2016). In the current study, vertically migrating taxa of fishes had a higher (0.28), yet not significantly different proportion of individuals ingesting microplastics than non-migratory taxa of fishes (0.23, Figure 4C). This result is consistent with findings from Davison and Asch (2011), where the authors reported that 11.6% and 4.8% of migratory and non-migratory fish taxa, respectively ingested microplastics, but again these comparisons are limited due to smaller sample sizes of non-migrators. Crustaceans exhibited the opposite behavior, with non-migratory taxa ingesting a significantly higher

migration behavior, feeding strategies, life history characteristics, and prey preference may be useful for explaining trends in microplastic ingestion in other environments. To obtain a clearer illustration of temporary plastic reservoirs in the midwater, future inquiry should include not only non-vertical migrators collected from different depths and geographic locations, but also organisms with diverse migration patterns and anatomical and physiological traits. It is plausible that an element of species specificity and combination of traits exists that is conducive for plastic ingestion, and these observations may be important for understanding the connectivity of marine food webs.

Acknowledgements

We thank the crews of the MV *Meg Skansi* and RV *Point Sur* for assistance with sampling, as well as Devan Nichols, Michael Novotny, Nathan LaSpina, Nina Pruzinsky, Richard Hartland, and Ronald Sieber for taxonomic identifications and sample processing assistance. We are grateful for permission from Dr. Jose Lopez to use the HEPA filtration hood in the Microbial Genomics Laboratory at Nova Southeastern University. We also thank Dr. Tracy Mincer in the Marine Plastics and Pollutants Laboratory at Harbor Branch Oceanographic Institute for assistance and facilities for chemical identification of polymers.

Funding

This research was made possible in part by a grant from The Gulf of Mexico Research Initiative, and in part by the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration's RESTORE Science Program under award NA19NOS4510193 to Nova Southeastern University. Data are publicly available through the Gulf of Mexico Research Initiative Information & Data Cooperative

(GRIIDC) at https://data.gulfresearchinitiative.org (doi: 10.7266/N7VX0DK2, 10.7266/N70P0X3T, 10.7266/N7XP7385, and 10.7266/N7902234).

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Main Text Figures and Tables

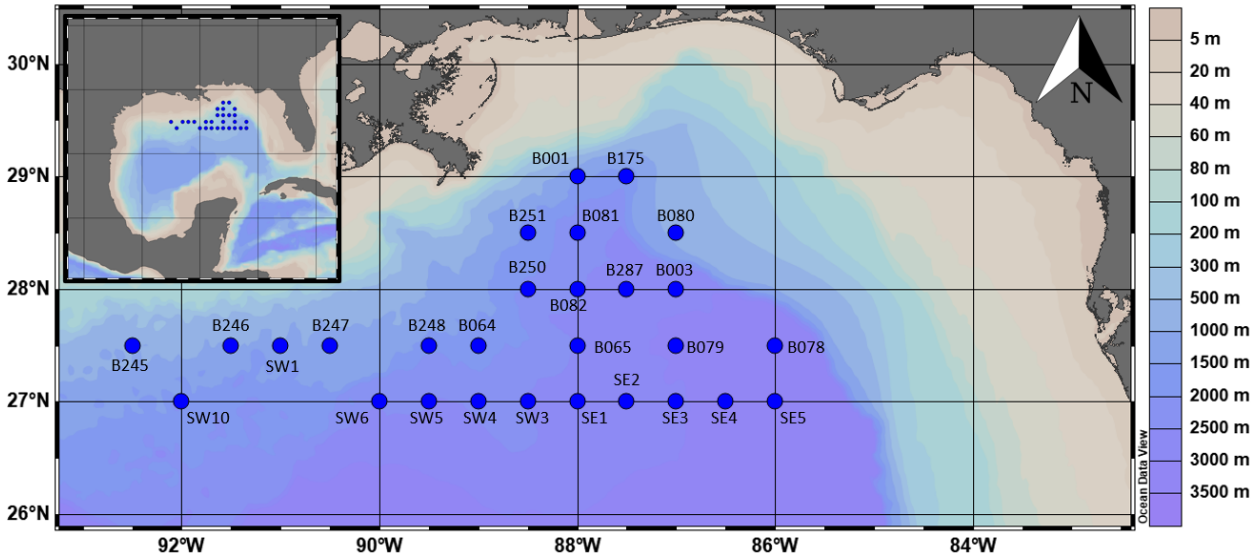

Figure 1. Trawl deployment locations in the Gulf of Mexico for collections of deep-pelagic crustaceans and fishes.

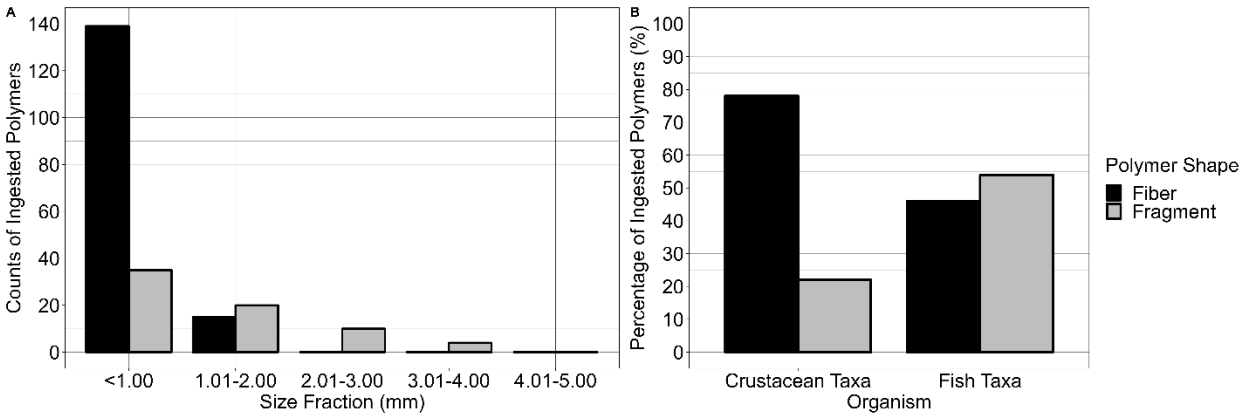

Figure 2. (A) The aggregated size fractions and composition of polymer shapes (fibers, fragments) ingested by deep-pelagic crustaceans and fishes and **(B)** the polymer shapes disaggregated for crustaceans and fishes.

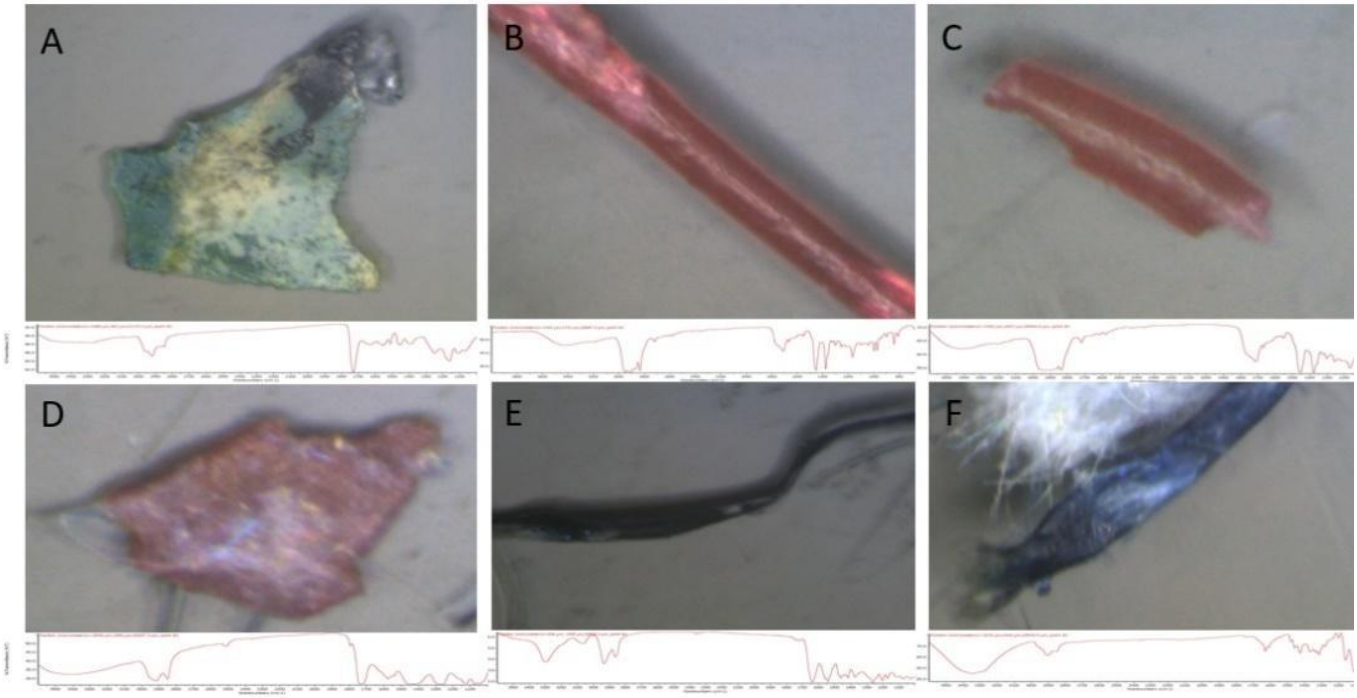

Figure 3. Example of chemically verified polymers ingested by deep-pelagic crustaceans and fishes. **(A)** polymethyl methacrylate; **(B-C)** polypropylene; **(D)** polyethylene; **(E)** polyamide 6.6; **(F)** cellophane. Chemical spectra, with characteristics plastic polymer peaks, are displayed below images of microplastics.

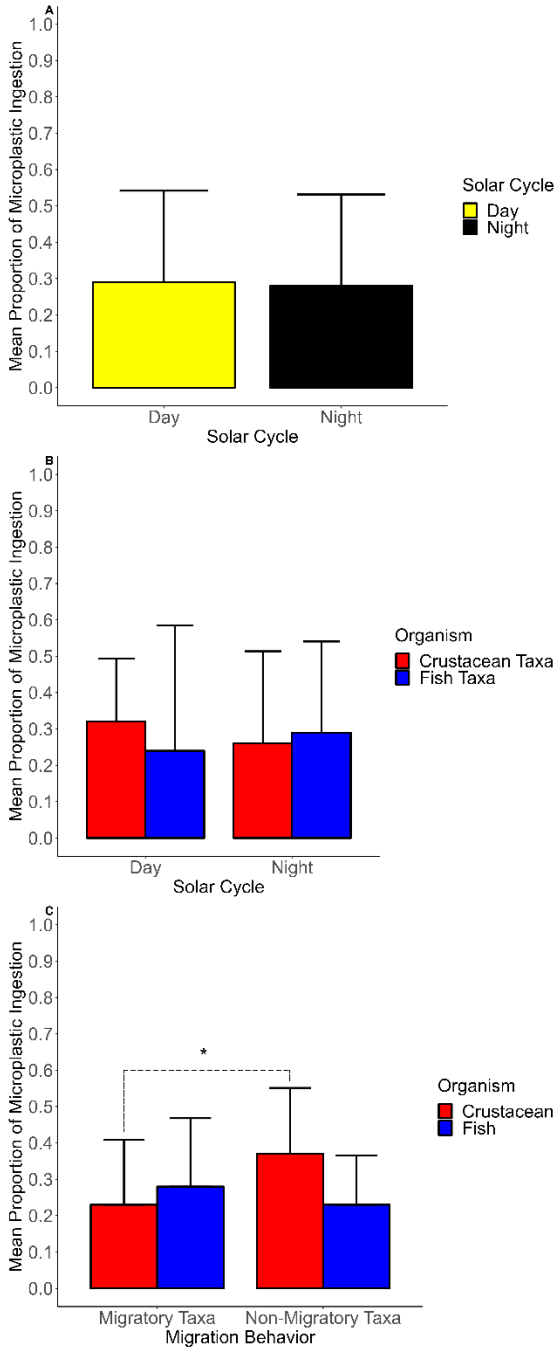

Figure 4. (A) The mean proportion of microplastics ingestion by crustacean and fishes (aggregated daytime- and nighttime-collected specimens) **(B)** microplastic ingestion proportion as a function of time of collection (daytime or nighttime) and **(C)** microplastic ingestion

proportion as a function of vertical migration behavior. Error bars are standard errors. * denotes statistical significance between groups.

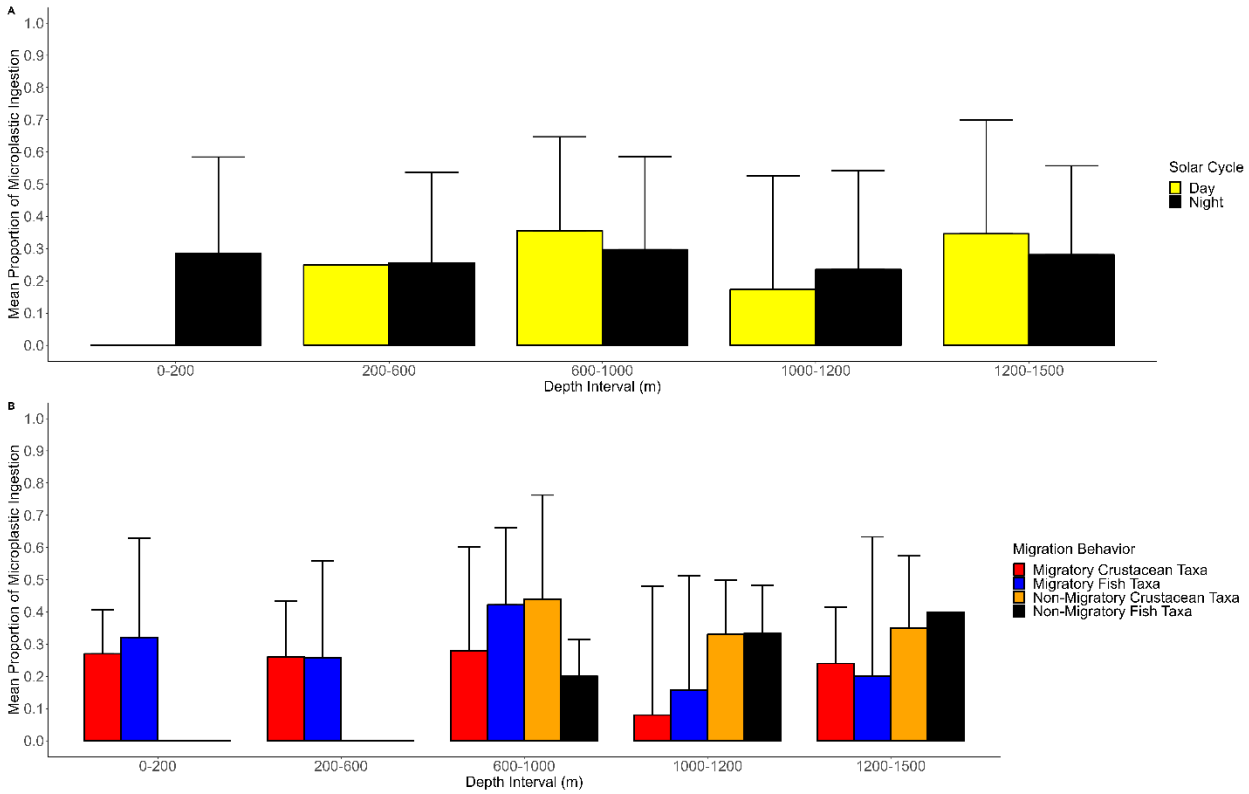

Figure 5. (A) The proportion of migratory and non-migratory crustacean and fish taxa that ingested microplastics, with discrete-depth intervals separated by day and night and **(B)** by migration behavior/taxa. Error bars are standard errors.

Table 1. Subsample of ingested polymers chemically identified by Fourier Transform Infrared spectroscopy. Theoretical densities were sourced from the Polymer Database (https://polymerdatabase.com/).

Species	Vertical Migration Behavior	Depth	Chemical Identity	Theoretical Density (g cm^{-3})	Polymer Shape	Animal Type
Acanthephyra curtirostris	NVM	1000-1200 m	Polyethyl acrylate acrylamide copolymer	0.93	Fragment	Crustacean
Acanthephyra curtirostris	NVM	1200-1500 m	Polyethylene-Polypropylene copolymer	0.95	Fragment	Crustacean
Acanthephyra purpurea	SVM	600-1000 m	Alkyd resin	1.6	Fiber	Crustacean
Bentheogenemma intermedia	NVM	1200-1500 m	Polyethyl acrylate acrylamide copolymer	0.93	Fragment	Crustacean
Bentheogenemma intermedia	NVM	1200-1500 m	Polyethyl acrylate acrylamide copolymer	0.93	Fragment	Crustacean
Benthosema suborbitale	SVM	200-600 m	Polymethyl methacrylate	1.18	Fragment	Fish
Benthosema suborbitale	SVM	0-200 m	Cellophane	1.42	Fiber	Fish
Ceratoscopelus warmingii	SVM	0-200 m	Polyamide 6.6	1.14	Fiber	Fish
Cyclothone obscura	NVM	1000-1200 m	Polyethylene-Polypropylene copolymer	0.95	Fragment	Fish
Gennadas capensis	SVM	1000-1200 m	Cellophane	1.42	Fiber	Crustacean
Gennadas capensis	SVM	200-600 m	Cellophane	1.42	Fiber	Crustacean
Gennadas valens	SVM	1200-1500 m	Alkyd resin	1.6	Fiber	Crustacean
Gennadas valens	SVM	1200-1500 m	Polyurethane	1.15	Fiber	Crustacean
Gennadas valens	SVM	200-600 m	Cellophane	1.42	Fiber	Crustacean
Gennadas valens	SVM	200-600 m	Cellophane	1.42	Fiber	Crustacean
Gennadas valens	SVM	0-200 m	Polyethylene	0.94	Fragment	Crustacean

Gennadas valens	SVM	1000-1200 m	Alkyd resin	1.6	Fiber	Crustacean
Lampanyctus alatus	SVM	200-600 m	Polymethyl methacrylate	1.18	Fragment	Fish
Lampanyctus alatus	SVM	200-600 m	Polyamide 6.6	1.14	Fiber	Fish
Notolychnus valdiviae	SVM	0-200 m	Cellophane	1.42	Fiber	Fish
Notostomus gibbosus	NVM	600-1000 m	Cellophane	1.42	Fiber	Crustacean
Plesionika richardi	SVM	0-200 m	Polypropylene	0.86	Fragment	Crustacean
Systellaspis debilis	SVM	0-200 m	Polyethylene-Polypropylene copolymer	0.95	Fragment	Crustacean
Systellaspis debilis	SVM	0-200 m	Polypropylene	0.94	Fragment	Crustacean
Systellaspis debilis	SVM	600-1000 m	Cellophane	1.42	Fiber	Crustacean

Table 2. Crustacean species from the Gulf of Mexico that were utilized for microplastic ingestion analyses. SVM = strong vertical migrator; WVM = weak vertical migrator; NVM = nonvertical migrator. Refer to Bos et al. (2021) for more information regarding migration classifications.

Species	Migratory Behavior	# of Individuals	Mean Carapace Length ± SD (mm)	Range of microplastics ingested (mean number of microplastics ingested) [% individuals ingesting microplastics]	Feeding Guild
Benthesicymidae					
Bentheogenemma intermedia	NVM	15	13.2 ± 2.19	0-3 (0.73) [40 %]	Detritivore, piscivore
Gennadas capensis	SVM	15	8.6 ± 1.5	0-4 (0.87) [47 %]	Detritivore, piscivore
Gennadas valens	SVM	21	9.2 ± 2.2	0-6 (0.62) [33 %]	Detritivore, piscivore
Oplophoridae					
Acanthephyra acanthitelsonis	WVM	2	18.2 ± 1.13	0-1 (0.5) [50 %]	Piscivore
Acanthephyra acutifrons	NVM	15	25.1 ± 11	0-2 (0.6) [53 %]	Detritivore, piscivore
Acanthephyra curtirostris	NVM	16	14.1 ± 4.34	0-3 (0.88) [50 %]	Detritivore, piscivore
Acanthephyra purpurea	SVM	43	10.7 ± 4.71	0-2 (0.30) [28 %]	Mixed zooplanktivore
Acanthephyra stylorostratis	NVM	28	9.3 ± 2.33	0-4 (0.39) [21 %]	Detritivore, piscivore
Notostomus elegans	SVM	7	18.3 ± 6.33	0-3 (1.0) [57 %]	Piscivore
Notostomus gibbosus	NVM	15	34.3 ± 10	0-3 (0.53) [33 %]	Detritivore, mixed zooplanktivore
Systellaspis debilis	SVM	46	9.96 ± 3.34	0-3 (0.26) [20 %]	Mixed zooplanktivore
Pandalidae					
Plesionika richardi	SVM	46	7.6 ± 1.9	0-5 (0.32) [24 %]	Piscivore
Pasiphaeidae					

Pasiphaea merriami	SVM	4	18.0 ± 3.76	0 (0) [0 %]	Mixed zooplanktivore
Sergestidae					
Gardinerosergia splendens	SVM	12	9.7 ± 2.1	0-1 (0.08) [8 %]	Mixed zooplanktivore
Sergia tenuiremis	SVM	15	17.2 ± 2.8	0-1 (0.13) [13 %]	Mixed zooplanktivore
Total		**300**		**128**	

Table 3. Fish species from the Gulf of Mexico that were utilized for microplastic ingestion analyses. SVM = strong vertical migrator; WVM = weak vertical migrator; NVM = non-vertical migrator. Refer to Bos et al. (2021) for more information regarding migration classifications.

Species	Migratory Behavior	# of Individuals	Average Standard Length ± SD (mm)	Range of microplastics ingested (mean number of microplastics ingested) [% individuals ingesting microplastics]	Feeding Guild
Gonastomatidae					
Cyclothone acclinidens	NVM	15	27.7 ± 1.5	0-1 (0.13) [13 %]	Mesozooplanktivore
Cyclothone obscura	NVM	15	39.1 ± 5.2	0-3 (0.47) [33 %]	Detritivore, Mesozooplanktivore
Cyclothone pallida	NVM	15	35.0 ± 6.1	0-1 (0.06) [7 %]	Mesozooplanktivore
Sigmops elongatus	SVM	6	39.0 ± 5.2	0-2 (0.63) [17 %]	Mixed zooplanktivore
Myctophidae					
Benthosema suborbitale	SVM	17	24.1 ± 3.4	0-1 (0.53) [53 %]	Mixed zooplanktivore
Ceratoscopelus warmingii	SVM	18	53.8 ± 9.1	0-2 (0.27) [19 %]	Generalist
Diaphus dumerilii	SVM	1	52.9 [NA]	4 (4) [100 %]	Mixed zooplanktivore
Diaphus lucidus	SVM	5	66.4 ± 13.6	0 (0) [0 %]	Mixed zooplanktivore
Lampanyctus alatus	SVM	57	37.4 ± 3.7	0-4 (0.56) [39 %]	Mixed zooplanktivore
Lampanyctus lineatus	SVM	18	61.6 ±15.8	0-4 (0.55) [18 %]	Mixed zooplanktivore
Lepidophanes guentheri	SVM	11	35.3 ± 9.9	0-1 (0.28) [28 %]	Mixed zooplanktivore
Notolychnus valdiviae	SVM	25	16.8 ± 1.3	0-2 (0.20) [12 %]	Mixed zooplanktivore
Notoscopelus resplendens	SVM	14	35.4 ± 7.3	0-1 (0.07) [7 %]	Mixed zooplanktivore
Sternoptychidae					
Argyropelecus aculeatus	SVM	2	30.5 ± 15.5	0 (0) [0 %]	Generalist
Argyropelecus hemigymnus	WVM	8	13.5 ± 2.4	0-1 (0.5) [50 %]	Mixed zooplanktivore
Sternoptyx diaphana	NVM	27	11.7 ± 3.6	0-5 (0.52) [33 %]	Copepodivore
Sternoptyx pseudobscura	NVM	3	14.1 ± 1.7	0 (0) [0 %]	Generalist
Stomiidae					
Chauliodus sloani	SVM	1	129.0 [NA]	0 (0) [0 %]	Piscivore
Total		**257**		**95**	