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LETTER

Measurements of the inherent optical properties of aqueous suspensions of microplastics

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Scientific Significance Statement

Plastics are becoming an increasingly abundant source of marine debris throughout the global ocean. Compared to macroplastics, marine microplastics are of particular concern given their relatively high number concentration, small size, and ability to enter the base of marine food webs. Currently, quantification of marine microplastics is limited by manual collection and counting, resulting in an incomplete assessment of global stocks. Optical methods can provide a means to circumnavigate these spatial and temporal limitations for global analyses. We present high-quality and comprehensive measurements of the spectral absorption and angular scattering properties of various microplastic assemblages consisting predominantly of particles less than 150 μm in diameter. These measurements are crucial for the development of optical methods to detect microplastics. We also identify several unique optical characteristics which can inform the development of such techniques.

Abstract

Libraries of inherent optical properties (IOPs) of microplastics are sparse, yet they are essential for the development of optical techniques to detect and quantify microplastics in the ocean. In this study, we describe our results and technique for the measurement of the IOPs of microplastic suspensions generated from commonly utilized plastics. The measurements included angle-resolved polarized light scattering, and spectral absorption and beam attenuation coefficients. We also performed ancillary characterization of particle properties, including size distribution, shape, and mass concentration of suspended matter. We observed several unique optical characteristics regarding absorption, scattering, and polarization properties compared with typical marine particle assemblages. We show that these results are useful for radiative transfer simulations as well as the potential development of novel plastic detection techniques from above- or in-water optical measurements.

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Author Contribution Statement: DK led the manuscript effort and prepared the first draft. All authors contributed to, edited, and approved the final manuscript. RF came up with original research questions and acquired initial funding, while DK, RF, and AE designed and implemented the experimental approach. DK prepared figures and managed all scattering, particulate absorption and suspended mass concentration data, RF managed holographic and microscope images, and AE managed hyperspectral absorption and beam attenuation data. SC prepared all radiative transfer simulations with input from DK.

Data Availability Statement: Data are available in SEANOE (https://doi.org/10.17882/98404).

Additional Supporting Information may be found in the online version of this article.

Plastics are becoming increasingly abundant in the ocean (UNEP, 2016). Oceanic plastic can be differentiated by composition and size, as well as the extent of physical and photodegradation (GESAMP 2019). All forms of oceanic plastic have potential consequences to the marine environment and ultimately human health, not all of which have been identified (Van Cauwenberghe and Janssen 2014; Rist et al. 2018). The size of plastic litter is particularly important for understanding its distribution and impact within marine environments. Macroplastics are typically defined as greater than 2500 μm in diameter while microplastics are less than 1000 μm, although this distinction has not been uniformly adopted (Frias and Nash 2019; Hartmann et al. 2019). Microplastics may be especially concerning, and the largest portion of scientific literature focuses on microplastics near the ocean surface which are larger than about 300 μm; a size-class visible to the naked eye and easily ensnared in typical neuston net tows (e.g., Hidalgo-Ruz et al. 2012; Masura et al. 2015; Setälä et al. 2016; Tamminga et al. 2018; Prata et al. 2019). Particles of these sizes (i.e., > 300 μm) are rarely a significant contributor to bulk optical properties in marine environments (Davies et al. 2014), and these large microplastics are currently thought to be undetectable by some satellite sensors (Hu 2021). To the contrary, optically significant "small" microplastics have not been well-studied (Enders et al. 2015). These smaller microplastics can bioaccumulate at the base of the marine food web (Cole et al. 2013; Brandon et al. 2020; Rogers et al. 2020), are hydrolyzed from larger plastic debris (Gigault et al. 2016; Song et al. 2017), and remain difficult to quantify using neuston net tows and visual identification under microscope (Song et al. 2015). Microplastic fibers are also rarely captured by net tows and represent a significant and underestimated threat to marine ecosystems (Rebelein et al. 2021).

Current methods for quantification of microplastics typically involve time-demanding counting under microscope, sometimes requiring significant sample processing and analyses to help differentiate plastic from particles of natural origin (Masura et al. 2015; Prata et al. 2019; Hildebrandt et al. 2022). Remote detection of positively buoyant macroplastics has strong potential by targeting signals in visible or infrared light (Garaba and Dierssen 2018; Tasseron et al. 2021; Zhou et al. 2021). Recent studies have also found light polarization to be useful for characterizing microplastics in laboratory environments (Yu et al. 2021; Valentino et al. 2022; Li et al. 2023). More studies, especially general feasibility studies, are still needed to develop optical approaches for quantifying small microplastics suspended in seawater. Some important questions remain: are we able to develop optical methods to quantitatively estimate microplastic concentrations, and at what concentrations will remote detection from space or airborne observation systems become feasible? To answer these, measurements of the inherent optical properties (IOPs) of microplastics are needed.

The IOPs of seawater provide a complete description of the interactions of visible light with marine material and are independent of the ambient light field. These include the spectral absorption and scattering properties per unit distance. IOPs are necessary for simulations of the oceanic light field and can facilitate the development of inverse optical algorithms aimed at identifying constituent properties from optical measurements (Gordon et al. 1975; Mobley 1994). Rarely, however, are IOPs of marine particles measured fully; either including spectral scattering with no information on angular distribution (e.g., Barnard et al. 1998) or the complete angle-resolved polarized light scattering properties with minimal additional information (e.g., Voss and Fry 1984). For the above reasons, simulations of radiative transfer in the ocean have relied on assumptions and incomplete measurements of IOPs. In the current study, we describe measurement results of a nearly complete set of IOPs for virgin microplastic suspensions, including spectral absorption and scattering coefficients, and important characteristics of angular scattering. We also present results from initial simulations using these measurements to investigate the possibility of remote detection of marine microplastics with satellite sensors.

Methods

Samples

Industrial-grade sheets of common plastics were utilized as source material for generating suspensions of microplastics (*see* Supporting Information for more details). The five polymer types comprising the sheets were glycol-modified polyethylene terephthalate (PETG), polystyrene (PS), polyvinyl chloride (PVC), polyamide 6 (PA6), and polypropylene (PP). Two additional samples composed of small fibers were also used as source material. The dryer lint (DL) material was generated by collecting lint from a household dryer following a cycle of washing and drying clothing made from synthetic fabrics (primarily polyester, acrylic, and elastane). The polyester fiber (PEF) material contained virgin fiber used for crafting or insulation.

Seawater measurements from two contrasting previous studies with equivalent measurements are used for comparison. San Diego, California (SD) samples were mostly organic- and phytoplankton-dominated, while Prudhoe Bay, Alaska (PB) samples were mostly inorganic- and nonphytoplankton-dominated. More detailed analysis of the samples can be found in Koestner et al. (2018, 2020*a*,*b*, 2021).

Instrumentation

Particle size information was obtained from the LISST-VSF and LISST-HOLO2 (Sequoia Scientific). Inversion of forward-scattering measured by the LISST-VSF is used to derive the number concentration of particles with equivalent spherical diameters $D = 2$–173 μm (Agrawal and Pottsmith 2000). The LISST-HOLO2 instrument collects holographic images to measure the particle number concentration for $D = 10$–5000 μm and resolve particle shape features with approximately 5 μm resolution.

The spectral absorption coefficient of particles $a_p(\lambda)$ was determined using a UV/VIS Lambda 850+ (Perkin Elmer) spectrophotometer equipped with a 15-cm integrating sphere. Measurements were made of particles retained on 25 mm diameter filters (Whatman grade GF/F, nominal pore size 0.7 μm) placed inside the sphere (Stramski et al. 2015; IOCCG Protocol Series 2018). Additional measurements of the spectral absorption $a(\lambda)$ and attenuation $c(\lambda)$ coefficients were made using an ac-s instrument (Seabird Scientific). These data were used to derive the spectral scattering coefficient ($\lambda = 400$–700 nm) of each sample; $b(\lambda) = c(\lambda) - a(\lambda)$.

Angle-resolved polarized light scattering measurements were made with a LISST-VSF instrument. This instrument estimates the volume scattering function β, Mueller matrix elements m_{12} and m_{22}, and the attenuation coefficient at a wavelength of 532 nm. β is then integrated over all or backscattering angles to derive scattering b or backscattering b_b coefficients. More detailed information on the instrument and data processing routines can be found in Koestner et al. (2018, 2020*b*).

Measurement procedure

A concentrated master suspension of each sample was used for diluted measurements of optical properties. Dry mass concentration of suspended particulate matter (SPM) and c (532 nm) for master suspensions were 5–44 g m^{-3} and 1–25 m^{-1}, respectively. Three concentrations were made through the serial addition of master suspension to 1.8 liters of water (deionized, degassed, 0.2 μm filtered) to ensure consistency of the LISST-VSF and ac-s measurements (dilution factors 3–30). For each concentration, 3 sets of 30 measurements (0.2 Hz sample rate) were made with the LISST-VSF using a magnetitic stir bar on low-speed and gentle hand-mixing between measurement sets to support particle suspension. Measurements of the purified water served as a blank for removal during data processing.

All measurement results were dilution corrected and refer to the optical and particulate properties of master suspensions. Only one of the triplicate measurement series was utilized to derive median values reported to avoid uncertainties with low measurement signal or multiple scattering errors, although results were consistent for most samples and prepared concentrations (coefficients of variation <10%). Normalized results are presented for comparisons of microplastic and seawater samples to avoid differences in magnitude associated with concentration.

Results

Shape and size

Microscope images of dehydrated master suspensions are presented in Fig. 1. The effects of sample preparation on various plastic types resulted in a variety of particle shapes and sizes represented. Some plastic types (e.g., PETG and PP) displayed highly irregular shapes with lots of microstructure, while PVC contained dense and less irregular shapes. PS samples displayed discernible folding patterns due to the expansion process during manufacture. In contrast, DL and PEF contained long fibrous particles. DL fibers were coarser and more varied while PEF fibers were smoother and more uniform. Of note, these images have some striking resemblance to detrital material at sea exemplifying challenges for visual identification of microplastics in seawater.

Figure 2 contains a summary of quantitative particle size and shape information. The particle size distributions are Junge-like without any clear populations, confirming that a continuous size-spectrum of particles was generated for each sample. There is variability between samples with PS containing relatively more larger particles ($D > 100$ μm) and PA6 containing the relative fewest mid-sized particles in the 10–20 μm range. Some noticeable differences among the extra DL, PEF, and PS samples can also be observed throughout the size range (Fig. 2a). Although the maximum particle size for samples was 650 μm based on sample preparation, only one sample (PS) contained suspended particles greater than 250 μm based on LISST-HOLO2 observations and 90% of total particle volumes were typically accounted for by particles less than 150 μm in diameter. Median diameters were 18–115 μm with an average value of about 50 μm based on LISST-VSF measurements, while median diameters from LISST-HOLO2 ranged 30–115 μm with an average value of about 58 μm. These size metrics are comparable to observations of small microplastics in the Atlantic Ocean (Enders et al. 2015). We can also assume that particles smaller than 2 μm are contributing to optical properties, although we have no definitive observations in this size range.

Regarding particle shape, eccentricity of particles increases with particle size with the least circular particles found typically greater than 100 μm (Fig. 2b). These measurements also confirm that the two fibrous samples (i.e., DL and PEF) had the highest eccentricity values (often greater than 0.90), although PEF tended to have higher values while DL had a larger range of values; a reasonable finding considering the source material of the DL (Fig. 1). All other samples which were blended had eccentricity values $\sim$ 0.75–0.80.

Absorption

The absorption coefficients of microplastic samples are shown in Fig. 3a. Here, absorption coefficients are normalized by SPM for comparison of absorption properties regardless of particle concentration. Generally, the microplastic samples have absorption spectra reminiscent of non-algal material without strong peaks and increasing absorption with decreasing wavelength of light. The microplastics also display relatively high ultraviolet absorption (Fig. 3a; $\lambda < 400$ nm). The PS sample, which appeared dark gray, has a flat absorption spectrum most likely related to pigmentation added during the manufacturing process. The DL sample also

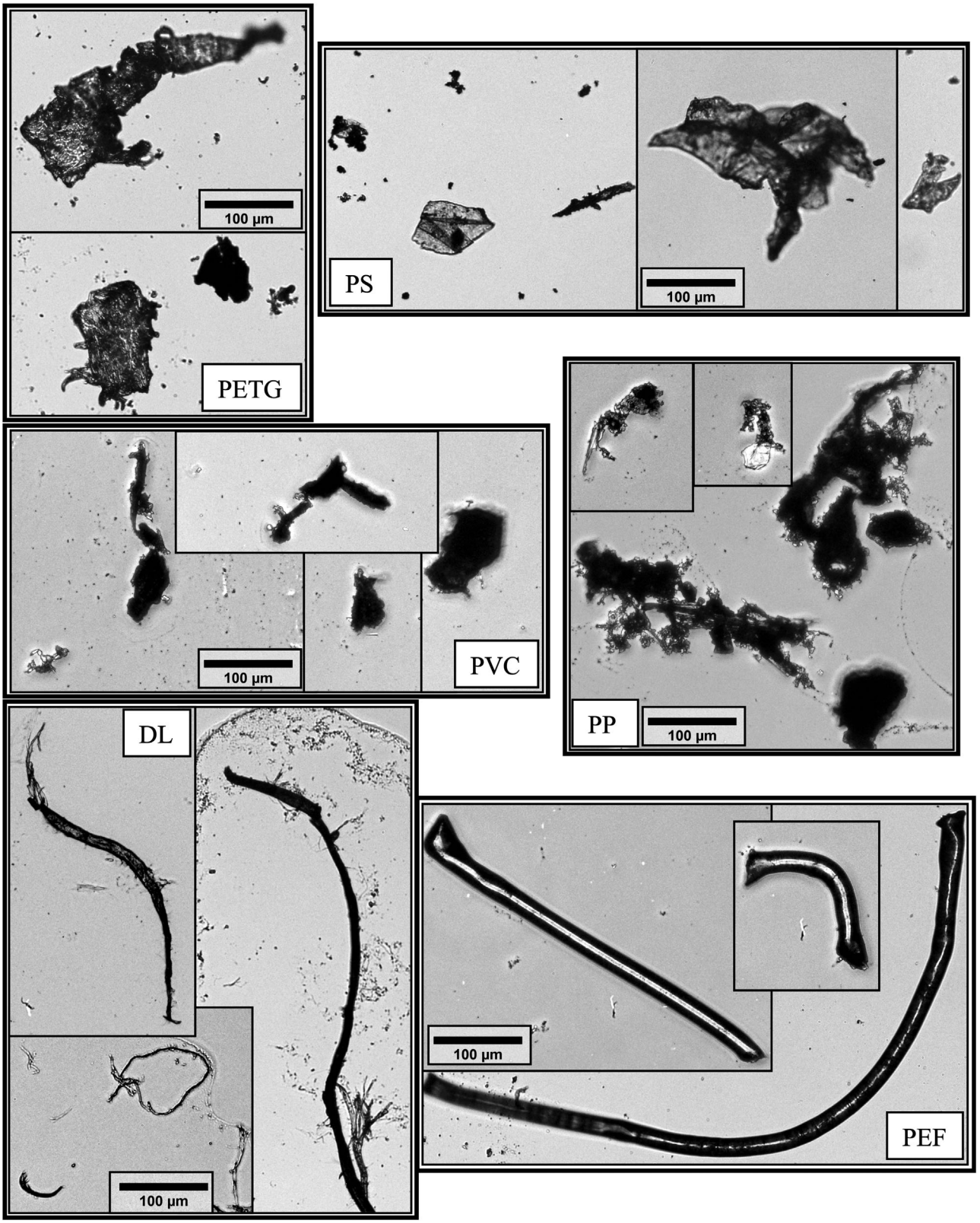

Fig. 1. Microscope images of microplastic samples. Sample IDs are displayed within each set of images. The scale bars shown in boxes apply to all images. No images are shown for PA6. Reproduced from Koestner et al. (2023).

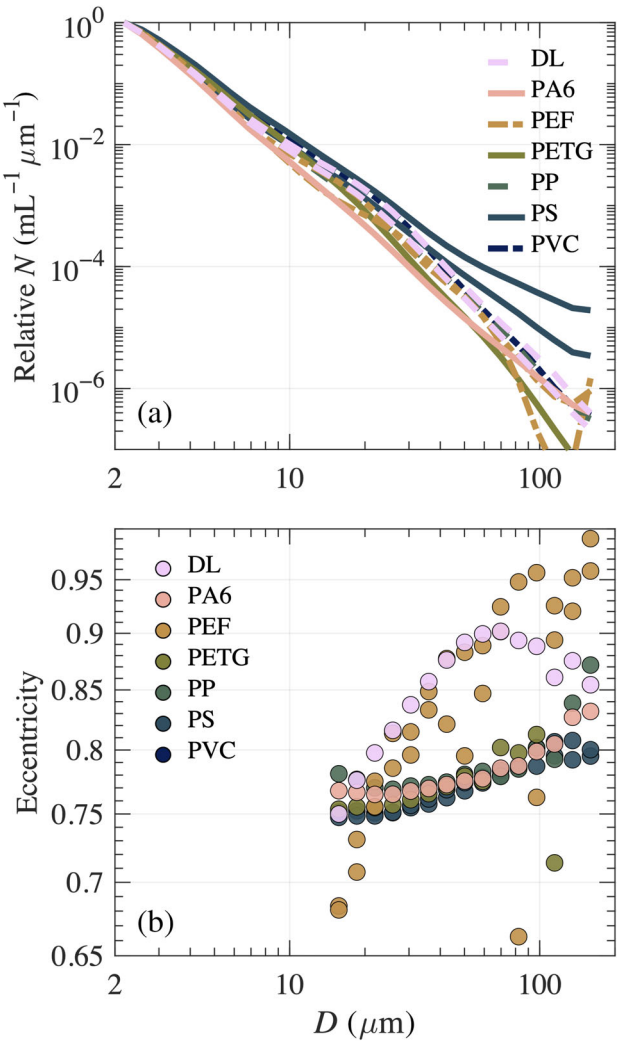

Fig. 2. Particle size and shape information for the microplastic samples. (**a**) Relative number of particles per milliliter normalized by bin-width derived from forward-scattering measurements with LISST-VSF. Power-law exponents are approximately 2.7–3.7. (**b**) Mean eccentricity per size-bin from analysis of measurements with LISST-HOLO2 instrument. Data are plotted as functions of equivalent spherical diameter D. Eccentricity is calculated as $\sqrt{1-(y^2/x^2)}$, where y is minor and x is major axis length of the projected area.

displays some unique absorption features near 600–650 nm owing to the presence of various clothing pigments. Figure 3a also includes a selection of seawater samples from contrasting coastal environments for comparison. Many seawater samples display patterns associated with phytoplankton pigments with absorption peaks in blue and red regions of the spectrum overlayed on a non-algal signal representable by an exponential function. Overall, most microplastic samples had lower absorption per unit mass in the blue portion of light compared with nearly all seawater samples included in this analysis.

Scattering

Angular scattering properties of microplastic and seawater samples are described in Fig. 3b. The particulate phase function $\tilde{\beta}_p$ is a normalized function which describes the angular distribution of unpolarized light scattering with scattering angle $\psi = 0°$ representing initial direction of light propagation. The microplastic $\tilde{\beta}_p$ show a similar pattern to the seawater samples with highly peaked near-forward scattering functions spanning over 4 orders of magnitude from near-forward to backward angles (Fig. 3b). However, unlike most seawater samples, the microplastic samples tend to have higher values of $\tilde{\beta}_p$ for scattering angles approximately 45–180° and backscattering ratios of ~2%–6%. By definition $\tilde{\beta}_p$ integrates to a constant value, and the differences in backwards angles between microplastic and seawater samples are balanced by increased forward scattering signal of seawater samples around 1–10° (not shown). PEF, PVC, and PS samples had distinctly high $\tilde{\beta}_p$ values in the backward angles compared with all seawater samples analyzed.

Polarization

Polarization properties of microplastic and seawater samples are shown in Fig. 3c,d. Here, we present partial results of the 4×4 scattering Mueller matrix m which describes the complete transformation of polarized light and can typically be reduced to six independent elements for randomly oriented natural assemblages of particles (van de Hulst 1957). The degree of linear polarization of light $\mathrm{DoLP_p}$ (defined as $-m_{12}/m_{11}$) describes the proportion of scattered light which is polarized linearly with positive values indicating vertical polarization. Apart from PEF samples, all microplastic samples had relatively low maximum values of $\mathrm{DoLP_p}$ near 90° compared with seawater samples, of which PP and PVC samples had very low maximum values less than about 0.2 (Fig. 3c). These low values indicate that scattered light is more randomly polarized, even at side-scattering angles where seawater samples tend to induce more vertically polarized scattered light. The PS samples appear to have more erratic $\mathrm{DoLP_p}$ functions likely from large particles occasionally entering the laser beam (Fig. 2). Interestingly, PEF samples had $\mathrm{DoLP_p}$ values which are higher than most seawater samples.

The m_{22} matrix element normalized by m_{11} describes cross-polarization effects of linearly polarized light and should be equal to 1 for homogenous spherical particles (van de Hulst 1957). Here, some data are excluded due to uncertainty in measurement reliability over certain angular ranges (Koestner et al. 2020*b*). For scattering angles around 70°, we found that microplastic samples (except for one PEF sample) had lower values of m_{22}/m_{11} compared with most seawater samples. The same is generally seen for backscattering angles around 110°, although the differences between seawater and fibrous samples DL and PEF are less apparent. We note that particle orientation likely effects m_{22}/m_{11}. Whereas SD and microplastic samples were likely well-mixed and randomly

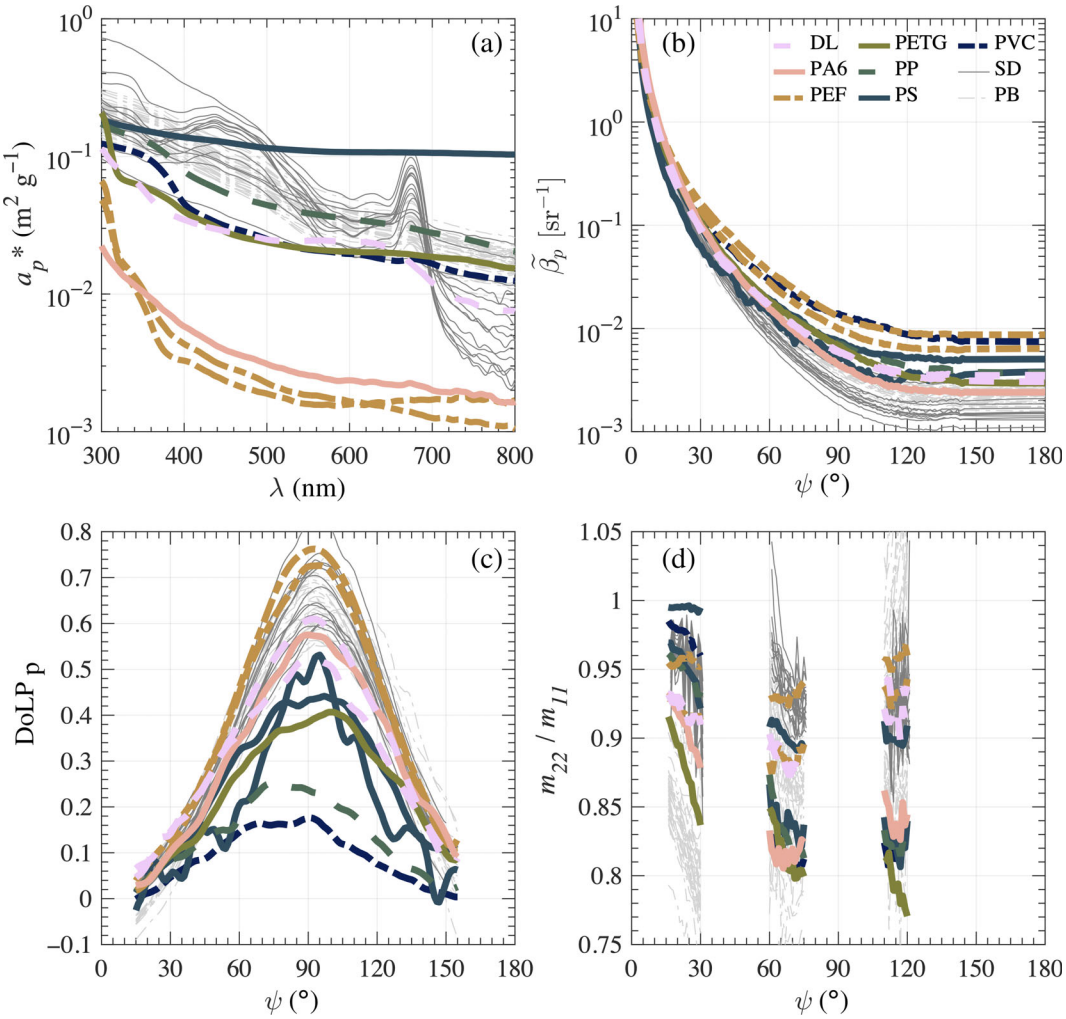

Fig. 3. Absorption and light scattering properties of microplastic and seawater samples. (**a**) Particulate absorption coefficients normalized by mass concentration, (**b**) Phase function, (**c**) Degree of linear polarization, and (**d**) Mueller matrix element m_{22} normalized by m_{11}. Microplastic samples are shown with colored lines while seawater samples from coastal San Diego, California (SD) and near Prudhoe Bay, Alaska (PB) are shown in gray.

oriented during measurements, PB samples were measured in situ with particles likely in preferential orientations.

Discussion

Summary of important optical characteristics

The microplastic samples show distinctive optical characteristics which provide a basis for their detection and differentiation from other particles suspended in seawater. Microplastic samples have low absorption per unit mass concentration while having high backscattering compared with seawater samples (Fig. 3a,b). In Fig. 4a, we present a proxy for remote sensing reflectance of particles. This proxy is foundational to the development of many remote sensing reflectance applications in ocean sciences (e.g., Gordon et al. 1975) and generally describes the proportion of sunlight which will reach an above-water downward looking detector. We find that nearly all microplastic samples display high reflectance compared with the seawater samples, especially in the blue portion of the spectrum (Fig. 4a). The exception is PS which also displayed high absorption from added pigmentation (Fig. 3a). We note that photodegradation of microplastics in the ocean surface is expected to result in loss of pigmentation (Martí et al. 2020). The low absorption and high scattering of microplastic samples is also corroborated by the ratio of $b(\lambda)$ to $c(\lambda)$ derived from the ac-s measurements. This ratio ranged from 75% to 95%, increasing with increasing wavelength with PS having the lowest values (not shown).

Finally, it was found that microplastic samples tend to depolarize light more than typical seawater samples, especially around scattering angles 60–120° (Fig. 3c,d). In Fig. 4b, we present a summary of depolarization characteristics which show that microplastic samples tend to cluster in the lower left portion of the scatterplot indicating scattering which

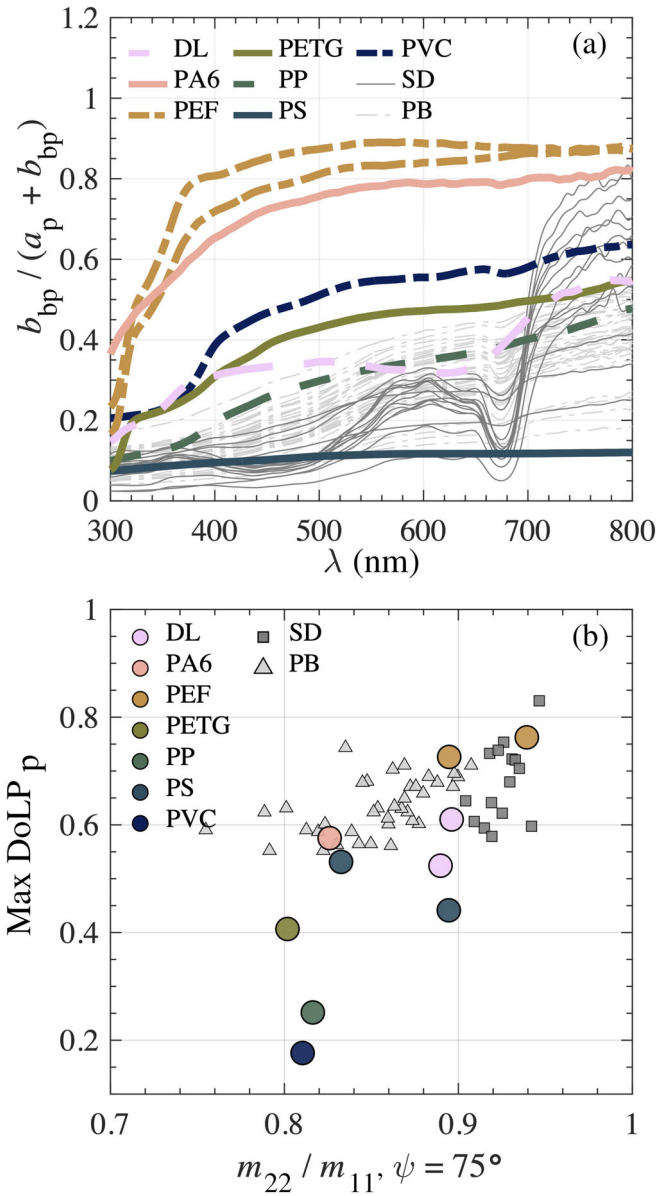

Fig. 4. (**a**) Proxy for particulate reflectance defined as the backscattering coefficient b_{bp} normalized by the sum of the absorption and backscattering coefficients ($a_p + b_{bp}$) for microplastic samples and seawater samples from near Prudhoe Bay, Alaska (PB). (**b**) Scatterplot examining linear depolarization by plotting maximum value of $DoLP_p$ vs. m_{22}/m_{11} at 75° scattering angle for microplastic and seawater samples as indicated.

induces more randomly oriented polarization. The main exception is PEF which scatters light with more linear polarization than most seawater samples. Polarization of light through scattering is complex; however, it can be expected that highly irregular or "rough" particle shapes can strongly depolarize light (Mishchenko et al. 2000). We believe that the highly smooth surfaces of PEF (Fig. 1) may explain lower depolarization (Fig. 4b) and natural weathering processes can roughen the smooth surface of the virgin PEF samples. Nonetheless, most microplastic samples tend to depolarize light more than typical seawater samples (Fig. 4b). Thus, it can be expected that the use of polarizing filters should aid in the identification or quantification of microplastic particles suspended in seawater. Although routine use of polarization in remote optical detection is generally limited to atmospheric material (Hansen and Travis 1974), polarization can be useful in ocean observing (Chami 2007; Loisel et al. 2008; Ibrahim et al. 2016).

Implications to above-water detection of microplastics

Recently, Hu (2021) proposed that the sensitivity of satellite sensors is not sufficient to detect the expected floating areal coverage of microplastics. This analysis relied on surface densities from neuston net trawls and focused on near-infrared bands of the multispectral imager on Sentinel-2. Importantly, the use of longer wavelengths limits detection to mainly floating material as there is minimal depth penetration of near-infrared sunlight. As a follow-up, we utilized our measurements in radiative transfer simulations to determine the suspended mass concentrations of microplastics necessary for remote detection (Stamnes et al. 2018). Here, we examine all visible bands of the Ocean and Land Color Instrument (OLCI) on Sentinel-3, a sensor with higher radiometric sensitivity partially at the expense of lower spatial resolution for measuring bulk optical properties. In Fig. 5, we present simulation results of the remote sensing reflectance from two water bodies representative of the South Pacific Subtropical Gyre with varying concentrations of microplastics. The addition of microplastics increases reflected light for nearly all wavelengths (Fig. 5a,b). Assuming an equal-part mixture of PEF, PETG, and PP distributed homogeneously throughout the water column, the detectable SPM for most visible bands of OLCI is about 10 mg m^{-3}, with concentrations as low as 2 mg m^{-3} detectable with blue and green bands (Fig. 5c,d). Importantly, this represents a potential minimum concentration that might be detectable based on our simulations, assumptions, and experimental measurements, and does not guarantee differentiation from other material in seawater. Assuming realistic uncertainty in the background material (i.e., varying the algal and nonalgal contributions; Supporting Information Fig. S3), the limit of around 2 mg m^{-3} is only detectable at 510 nm, while relatively large changes in reflected blue light are seen following changes in background composition (Fig. 5c,d). We refer to estimates of the average surface mass concentration of microplastics in the Great Pacific Garbage Patch as approximately 2.5 kg km^{-2} (or SPM = 33 mg m^{-3} assuming half of the 15-cm Manta trawl was submerged), noting the microplastic size range was 0.5–5 mm and this refers mainly to buoyant material (Lebreton et al. 2018).

Concluding remarks

In this study we present the first, to our knowledge, comprehensive measurement results of the IOPs of common microplastic suspensions. We generated suspensions with continuous size-spectrums ranging from less than 2 μm to over 100 μm in

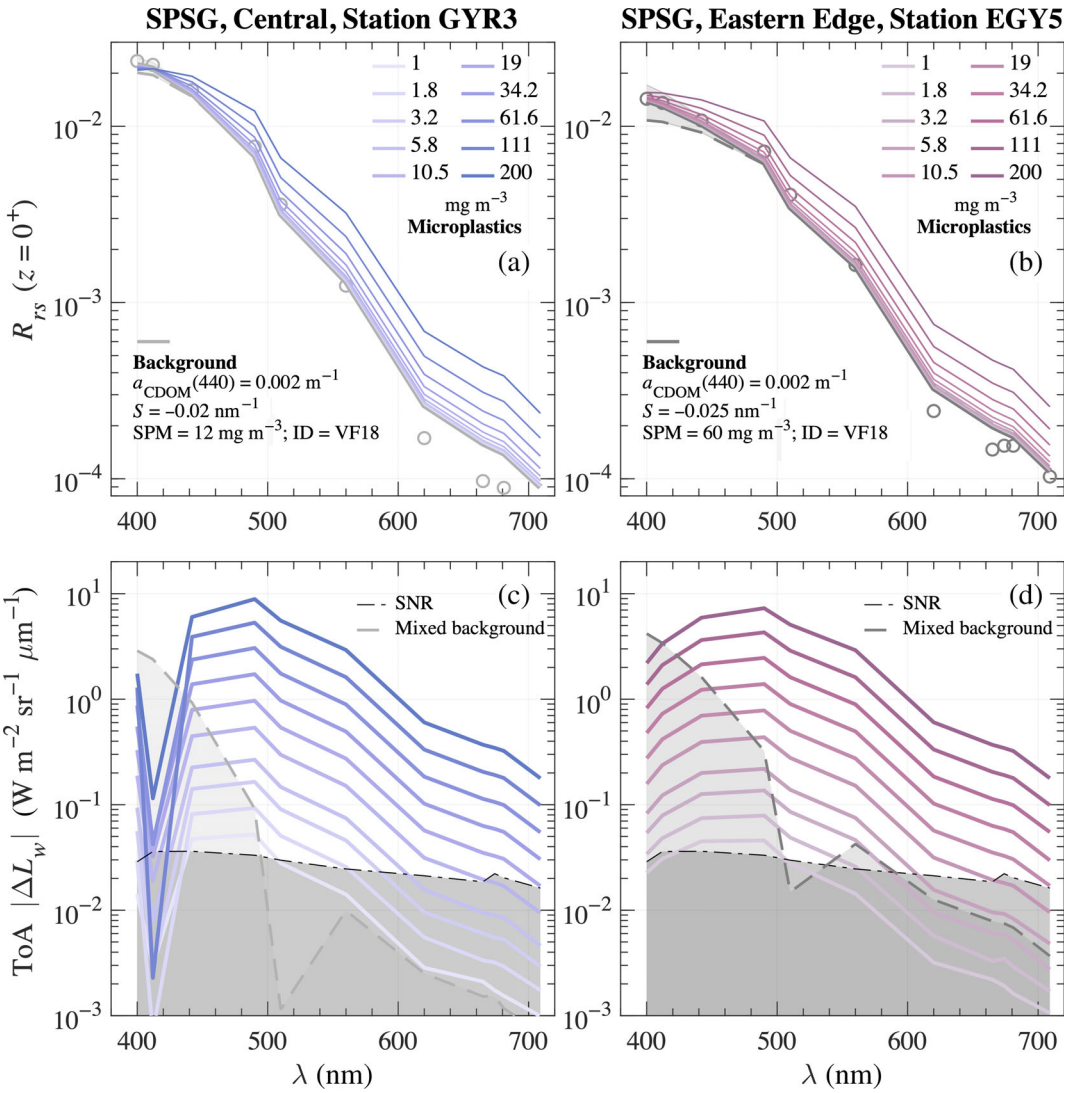

Fig. 5. Summary of radiative transfer simulations for an ocean–atmosphere system at bottom of atmosphere (**a**,**b**) and top of atmosphere (**c**,**d**) for two backgrounds representing center (**a**,**c**) and edge (**b**,**d**) of the South Pacific Subtropical Gyre (SPSG). Results are presented for the background (gray solid lines) with various dry suspended mass concentrations (SPM) of microplastics added (colored solid lines) as indicated in legends. Microplastic concentrations refer to total SPM of an equal-part mixture of PEF, PETG, and PP added to the background. (**a**,**b**) Remote sensing reflectance just above the ocean surface, R_{rs} ($z = 0^+$). The background composition in terms of SPM of San Diego sample VF18 and absorption coefficient of colored dissolved organic matter (a_{CDOM}) at 440 nm and its exponential slope (S) is shown in the panel. A gray dashed line refers to an alternate background which is composed of an equal-parts mixture of San Diego samples VF17 (nonalgal and organic dominated) and VF18 (algal and organic dominated) describing reasonable variability in background composition. Gray open circles denote measured R_{rs} ($z = 0^+$) reported in Stramski et al. (2008), generally supporting chosen background optical properties and validity of simulations to approximate the GYR3 and EGY5 stations from the BIOSOPE cruise. (**c**,**d**) absolute difference in upwelling radiance (ΔL_w) from background at the top of atmosphere (ToA). A dash-dotted line and darker shaded area represent the technical specifications of the signal-to-noise ratio (SNR) for Sentinel-3 OLCI (Donlon et al. 2012), while the dashed line and lighter shaded area represent additional uncertainty pertaining to the mixture of background materials. Microplastics can be considered detectable if ΔL_w of added microplastics exceeds both the SNR and the change in signal deriving from varying background composition. See Supporting Information for more details regarding simulations.

diameter with a major contribution of optically significant particles. The spectral absorption and angular scattering properties were measured using state-of-the-art optical instrumentation and with good reproducibility of results. We describe microplastic results in comparison to natural seawater samples from various marine environments. Of most importance, our measurements are more representative of the types of small suspended microplastics that are entering the base of marine food webs (Cole et al. 2013; Brandon et al. 2020) and appear most numerous in oceanic environments (e.g., Song et al. 2014; Enders et al. 2015; Hansen et al. 2023), as opposed to larger microplastics considered in earlier studies (e.g., Garaba and Dierssen 2018; Hu 2021).

With some minor exceptions, we found that microplastics have lower absorption, backscatter more strongly, and depolarize light to a greater extent than natural marine particles. These characteristics may enable optical detection and differentiation from typical material suspended in seawater, especially in open-ocean oligotrophic gyres where many plastics have accumulated (Eriksen et al. 2013; Lebreton et al. 2018). We estimate that microplastic concentrations as low as 2 mg m^{-3} may be detectable by green channels of satellite detectors in these environments, although more dedicated studies are needed to examine effects of vertical distribution of microplastics and the potential for differentiation from natural oceanic material using spectral signatures. We acknowledge that our results are for virgin microplastic suspensions produced in a laboratory environment; however, they represent a pivotal first step. We also urge further studies measuring IOPs of microplastics following biofouling and weathering processes such as photodegradation and natural fragmentation.

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