



## MORE THAN A MESS

Facts about marine litter from Sea Grant programs

### MARINE LITTER: The problem

- Each year thousands of marine mammals, birds, and fish are victims of our throw-away society.
- Dolphins swallow plastic bags and suffocate. Birds dive through six-pack yokes and strangle themselves. Fish swallow indigestible floating plastic pellets.
- Trash is literally one of the biggest problems facing our nation's beaches.
- On the surface, it spoils the scenery.
- But as the trash piles up, so do the consequences.
- Rusty cans pose danger for barefooted beachgoers. Scrapped fishing line clogs motorboat propellers. And the trash costs coastal communities tourist dollars.
- But worst of all, trash is deadly.
- More often than not, the killer is plastic litter.
- That synthetic wonder material built to last a lifetime sucks the breath from marine wildlife.
- Some experts say that cleaning up the seas is likely to become one of the most pressing environmental issues of the next decade.

### MARINE LITTER: It's lethal

- Trash is more than an unsightly mess. It kills.
- No one knows for sure how many marine animals

are affected, but biologists say that for every animal they find entangled in a net or strangled with monofilament line, there are many more they don't see.

- Each year 30,000 Northern fur seals die after they become entangled in discarded fishing nets and plastic strapping bands, says Kathryn O'Hara, marine biologist with the Center for Environmental Education.
- Fifty of the world's 280 species of seabirds are known to ingest everything from plastic pellets to bottle caps. Each year, more than 250,000 seabirds get tangled in offshore drift nets.
- Sea turtles mistake plastic bags for jellyfish, their favorite food. And thousands of turtles, fish, and birds die each year because they get stuck in plastic refuse or swallow it and choke to death.
- In North Carolina, ornithologist James Parnell found the body of a laughing gull with fishing line twisted around its spindly legs and feet.
- But when he picked up the remaining line to reel it in, he found the bodies of five more birds strung together.
- The fishing line was meant to capture fish. Instead, a careless fisherman killed six birds.

### MARINE LITTER: It lasts

More plastic is produced in the United States than the combined output of steel, aluminum and copper.

And unfortunately, the qualities that make plastic so popular—light weight, durability and strength—also make it a terror on the high seas. Some plastics are engineered to last more than 450 years. That means one six-pack yoke has the potential to kill over and over again.

But the problem is not how much plastic we produce or use; it's how we dispose of it.

## **MARINE LITTER: The law**

### FEDERAL LAW

The Marine Plastic Pollution Research and Control Act of 1987 is a U.S. law that implements Annex V of the International Convention for the Prevention of Pollution from Ships (called MARPOL, for marine pollution). The MPPPCA prohibits the dumping of plastics within 200 miles of the nation's territorial waters and in all navigable inland waters. The provisions apply to all vessels, from the smallest fishing boat all the way up to supertankers.

The law also requires ports and terminals to provide waste reception facilities or to contract with a private company to provide the facilities. Marinas and public and private terminals are covered by the law.

### STATE LAW

Littering is a crime in every state, but in most cases, enforcement of the litter laws is simply a low priority.

To prosecute an offender, a law officer must witness the act. But in some states, citizen witnesses are accepted.

The traditional method of dealing with litterers is imposing a fine or, in the case of repeated offenses, short-term imprisonment. Fines range from \$50 to \$500 per offense.

Some states have even adopted a policy of requiring offenders to do community service work.

## **MARINE LITTER: Where is it coming from?**

The litterbugs vary.

Careless beachgoers leave behind styrofoam cups, sandwich bags, fast food containers and other trash.

But beachgoers, often the easiest group to target, are only part of the problem.

Other offenders include merchant ships, the U.S. Navy, and commercial and recreational fishermen.

The U.S. Coast Guard estimates that recreational boaters generate about 34,000 metric tons of garbage per day, or about a pound per recreational boater.

Commercial fishermen lose or discard tons of fishing gear yearly. And derelict fishing nets don't stop fishing once they're discarded. They continue to catch fish and entangle marine wildlife for many more years.

In some states, the source of trash is hard to pinpoint. In Texas, for example, 75 to 90 percent of the trash that shows up on its beaches comes from offshore sources. Gulf of Mexico currents converge on Texas beaches, bringing trash that flowed down the Mississippi, litter from offshore oil rigs and garbage from foreign ships.

## **MARINE LITTER: Are there any solutions?**

Researchers are working on degradable plastics.

Organizations such as the National Sea Grant Program are educating people about the perils of marine debris, especially plastics, to wildlife and our environment.

Many coastal states are now sponsoring beach cleanups.

## **MARINE LITTER: What can you do about it?**

- Remember, the beach belongs to you. Don't toss trash overboard or leave debris on the beach. Every litter bit hurts.
- Take as few plastic and metal products as possible onboard vessels and to the beach.
- When you're fishing, don't discard any pieces of torn net, broken fishing line or plastic bait bags in the water. Dispose of worn-out fishing gear onshore.
- Get involved.

**You're the solution to pollution.**  
Don't be part of the problem.



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