

Litter Litter Everywhere

by Kenn Oberrecht



Any responsible person who spends time on Oregon's coastal waterways, or who enjoys sightseeing or hiking along our trails and beaches is rightfully appalled by litter that blemishes the region's

legendary beauty. Floating trash bobs in the ripples and swirls in the currents of our rivers, heading seaward. Much of it washes up on the shores of our estuaries. Advancing from the ocean, waves dump seaborne garbage on our beaches.

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As bad as marine litter might seem here at times, problems in other states are much more severe. In fact, if the results of the National Beach Cleanup of last fall are any indication, Oregon's beaches are among the cleanest in the nation. Efforts of 2,665 volunteers led to the collection of 43,200 pounds of trash along 120 miles of Oregon beaches. That worked out to about 360 pounds of garbage per mile, nothing to be proud of, but better than it might have been.

To the south, 16,122 Californians combed 368 miles of beach and found 125 tons of litter, or about 682 pounds per mile. More than 3,000 volunteers in Washington cleaned 60 miles of ocean beaches and 33 miles along the shores of Puget Sound. They found almost 103 tons, for an average of 2,211 pounds per mile.

Of course, the people who play or work on our waterways and along our shorelines seem the most likely litterers, but they're not the worst

offenders. Whether engaged in outdoor recreation or occupation, people discard tons of trash as they go. The litter list is long, including disposable diapers and butane lighters, beverage containers and bottle caps, plastic utensils and six-pack yokes, cigarette filters and candy wrappers, polystyrene cups and fast-food containers, and just about any other kind of trash that can be thoughtlessly discarded.

The worst offenders of all, though, are the world's merchant vessels and passenger ships, most of which dump their refuse at sea. Studies have shown, in fact, that of the ships that dock at U.S. ports, a mere three percent leave trash in the bins provided them.

The U.S. Coast Guard reports that recreational boaters generate about a pound of garbage per boater per day, for a daily total of about 37.5 tons nationwide. According to the National Academy of Sciences, every year, commercial-fishing fleets lose 149,000 tons of non-biodegradable gear such as monofilament lines, traps and pots, polypropylene ropes, and miles of nets. They also discard 26,000 tons of plastic packaging material. The navies of the world are also great ocean polluters, producing as much as three pounds of trash per day per sailor, all of which gets tossed overboard.

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Little of the trash discarded these days, whether buried in landfills or jettisoned at sea, breaks down quickly. In fact, most of the litter creating crises around the globe is plastic, in one form or another that will still be here centuries from now. All litter is an eyesore, and much of it is dangerous. Many of the discarded plastics, whether at sea or washed ashore, are also serious threats to wildlife. We have no alternative but to keep it cleaned up.

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