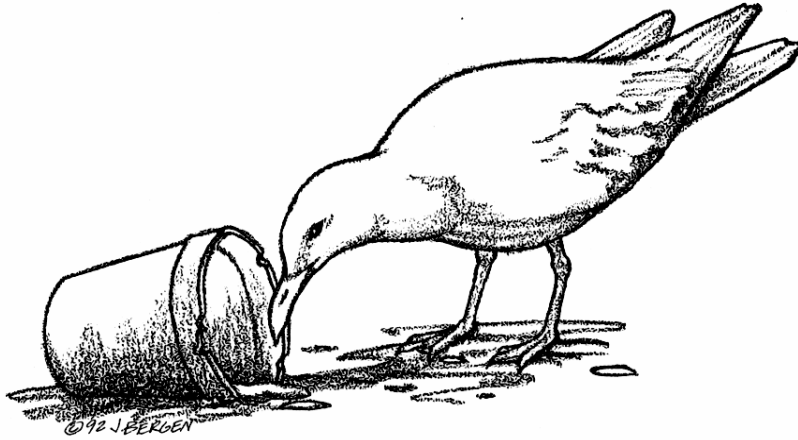


# The Ballooning Problem of Plastic Litter

by Kenn Oberrecht

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*Just as the castoff plastic from other states and nations can drift in oceans currents and eventually wash up on Oregon's shores, or endanger our migratory mammals, birds, and fish, so can our discarded trash become someone else's nuisance or hazard.*

As beachcombers know, some glass floats and other treasures that break free of currents during winter storms and tumble ashore might have been drifting for years. Along with the prizes comes the jettisoned junk of countless freighters, tankers, cruise ships, navy vessels, and fishing boats. They might as well be garbage scows for all the litter they send our way.

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Much of the flotsam and jetsam riding the currents of the world's oceans is plastic. In fact, researchers at the Woods Hole Oceanographic Institution found 46,000 pieces of plastic per square mile on the open seas. It's no wonder we're losing so much wildlife to this marine menace.

The National Marine Fisheries Service reports that about 30,000 northern fur seals die each year as a result of becoming entangled in fragments of nets and cargo-strapping bands discarded at sea. During the past 30 years, the population of the species has declined by 50 percent.

Plastic bags drifting in the ocean and presumably resembling jellyfish have lured sea turtles to their death. Similarly, whales and porpoises have ingested plastic bags and sheeting and later died of suffocation.

Both fish and birds ingest carelessly discarded polystyrene "peanuts" used for package dunnage. Resin pellets from which plastic products are made also lure fish and sea birds, possibly because of their resemblance to fish eggs and other small organisms common in their diets.

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Plastics kill by entanglement and suffocation. They can poison hapless creatures or cause starvation. They even kill in more bizarre ways, as in the case of a young hawksbill turtle found near Hawaii. An autopsy revealed an intestinal tract so full of plastic bags, polystyrene chips, and monofilament line as to render the animal buoyant and incapable of diving.

Another practice that needlessly litters the earth and the easiest one to stop is the releasing of helium-filled balloons at sporting, political, and other events. Despite what balloon manufacturers would have us believe, these balloons can ride air currents for hundreds of miles and can kill wildlife.

According to the Center for Marine Conservation, as part of an experiment to investigate wind direction conducted during the 1988 National Science and Technology Week, school children released 250,000 tagged, helium-filled balloons. A month later, only five percent of those balloons had been recovered, and one turned up on an island 1,300 miles from the release point. No telling where the remaining 237,500 balloons went. Universities, cities, and states throughout the country have outlawed balloon releases. We can and should prohibit the hazardous practice everywhere.

As to the rest of the plastic littering land and sea and killing wildlife, careful disposal, incineration, and recycling seem the best hopes for the future. Of course, the ignorant and irresponsible will keep tossing their trash wherever they please, and the rest of us will keep picking up after them.

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