

Eye on the Environment for March 25, 2012

## **Little Actions Can Make a Big Difference**

By **Arne Anselm**

The Ventura Countywide Stormwater Quality Management Program has been monitoring the quality of stormwater runoff in Ventura County for over ten years. The data show how much the runoff from a storm differs from water in a natural stream. Bacteria counts used to measure beach water quality are always high following a major flow of water from the streets, and that is why surfers are advised to stay out of the water after a storm.

A recent analysis of the ten year data history showed the concentration of the pollutants can be associated with something simple. Dirt. It may come as a surprise; after all, "Dirt don't hurt." But the reality is, pollutants like bacteria or heavy metals stick to dirt, and as the dirt is transported by the storm, so are the pollutants.

You may think dirt is everywhere and nothing you do can make a difference, but the truth is simple acts by individuals such as you can make a big difference.

The following tale adapted from the story "The Star Thrower" by Loren Eiseley, demonstrates how one person's efforts can make a difference when faced with an overwhelming problem.

*An old man was walking on the beach and saw a young lady picking up starfish and tossing them into the ocean.*

*"Young lady," he asked, "Why are you throwing starfish into the ocean?"  
"The day is hot, the tide is going out, and if I do not throw them in they will die."  
"But young lady, there are miles and miles of beach and starfish all along it? You cannot possibly make a difference."*

*The young woman listened politely then picked up another starfish and threw it into the sea, saying: "I made a big difference to that one."*

Like the starfish in the story our ocean and its inhabitants face serious threats. And just like the story, a simple act by individuals like you can make a big difference.

But unlike the story, what threatens our ocean isn't a low tide and a hot sun; it's the little bit of pollution that escapes your yard, or driveway, your trash cans, or maybe even from your finger tips. Dirt from your driveway may not look like pollution, but it is some of the worst stuff to allow in the storm drain. When we allow pollution to escape our control and reach a creek, river, or the ocean, it has an impact. Those little bits add up to the major source of water pollution today.

Reach for the broom to clean up, not the hose. Sweep and put the debris in a trash can. Using a hose to clean up wastes water, pollutes the environment and is prohibited by the County and every city in Ventura.

Conserve water: Over watering provides a highway for dirt and pollutants into the watershed and eventually the ocean. Designed to kill, residential landscape chemicals are seriously harmful to the environment. Once applied, they are often washed away into the gutter by over watering. To avoid runoff, do not over water after applying the chemicals and do not apply pesticides, weed killers or fertilizers before a rain.

Don't add to nature: Pet waste and discarded food seem natural but are sources of bacteria that can make people sick. Pick up after your dog and dispose the waste properly in trashcans. The same is true for baby diapers and food waste. Keep the trash lids tight so these items won't accidentally become part of the watershed.

You may not get the instant gratification from sweeping your driveway as you would from saving a starfish, but with an eye on the environment the little act of following these tips will make a big difference.

*On the net:*

[www.cleanwatershed.org](http://www.cleanwatershed.org).

*— Arne Anselm is a water quality manager with the Ventura County Watershed Protection District.*