

Learn from the Litter

By Lara Meeker and David Goldstein

First organized in 1985 by the California Coastal Commission, Coastal Cleanup Day has grown to be an international event. The web site of the Ocean Conservancy, the main international organizer, calls the event “the world’s largest volunteer effort for the ocean,” while Guinness Book of World Records calls it the “largest garbage collection” ever organized.

The event takes place each year on the third Saturday in September, and results of this year’s event are now available. California volunteers collected over a million pounds of trash, and locally, nearly 3,000 Ventura County residents collected 8,180 pounds of litter and 2,295 pounds of recyclables at fifteen local beaches and seven inland waterway sites.

Coastal Cleanup Day is not just about cleaning beaches and waterways; it also raises awareness of litter, collects data for planning litter reduction strategies, and motivates behavior changes. As items are picked up, they are tallied, categorized, and reported by cleanup location.

Our litter standards have come a long way since the 1950s; it’s socially unacceptable and unlawful to throw litter out of the car window or toss food wrappers on the street. However, one litter item remains at the top of beach and river cleanup list year after year – cigarette butts.

In Ventura County, cigarettes and smoking related litter has made up 25-44 percent of total litter and debris collected for the past six years. Cigarette butts at the coast often come from litter in street gutters, curbside planter boxes and on public park lawns, all of which wash down to the ocean via storm drains. Efforts to intercept and filter out solid debris in runoff are on the rise, with street sweeping and storm drain trash screens and the adoption of a new statewide trash policy, but for now cigarette butts remain commonplace.

Cigarette filters are made of cellulose acetate, a plastic, and just like other forms of plastic they are not biodegradable. Marine birds, turtles, fish and mammals that eat plastic pollution can die from choking, starvation and intestinal blockage. Plastics also have the ability to accumulate harmful toxins; currently researchers are studying the transfer of these toxins to fish and marine mammals, as well as potential human health impacts.

The most effective way to keep pollution out of our ocean and rivers is to stop it from getting in the environment in the first place. Eben Schwartz, the California Coastal Commission’s Marine Debris Program Manager, in a report titled “Where is all this trash coming from?” estimated 60 to 80 percent of marine debris originates from land sources. Rainstorms and wind mobilize and turn upstream litter into marine debris downstream. California desperately needs rain this winter, and El Nino may result in a wetter than average year; however, each heavy rainstorm is likely to bring trash and debris to our

rivers and beaches. In some situations, litter can even clog storm drains and cause runoff to back up onto streets causing local flooding.

So what can you do? Keep an eye on the environment, and when wet and windy weather is forecast, plan a neighborhood cleanup before the storm. Also, do not overfill your garbage, recycling and yard waste bins; secure the lids so material does not blow out or fall out during collection. After a rainstorm, look for “first flush” cleanup events to join, and help pick up litter and debris at your favorite beach. Also, this weekend kicks off the holiday shopping season, so consider some ways to reduce and reuse, such as placing reusable shopping bags in your car so you have them handy, and consider the amount and type of packaging when choosing items to purchase.

On the web

2015 Ventura County Results : <http://www.vccoastcleanup.org/>

www.cityofventura.net/volunteeropportunities

Marine Debris Tracker app <http://www.marinedebris.engr.uga.edu/>

National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) Marine Debris Blog
<http://marinedebris.noaa.gov/>

http://www.coastal.ca.gov/nps/debris_origins.pdf

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