

Trash Free Waters: The Urban-Coastal Connection



Across the country, people who live in urban communities along rivers, lakes, and oceans are doing their part to transform polluted or litter-filled waterways into vibrant hubs of community life. Sometimes neglected, urban waters are increasingly being recognized for the key role they can play in urban revival. Clean waters can create opportunities for recreation, growth for new businesses, restored aquatic ecosystems, and healthy habitats for plants and wildlife.

One of the biggest challenges facing urban waters is pollution from trash and litter. Items like cigarette butts and bottles not only make our waterways look dirty and unsightly, but also can pose serious human health risks, burden local economies, and endanger wildlife. Millions of pounds of trash and litter are removed from waterways each year during cleanup activities, but to effectively tackle the problem, communities must also focus on preventing trash and litter from entering waterways in the first place.

Trash on the Move

Urban areas with dense concentrations of people can be responsible for much of the trash and litter found in our waterways. Habits such as overfilling garbage and recycle bins, littering, and mishandling waste can start trash on a journey to nearby waterways. Streams feed into rivers, and rivers feed into the ocean, often carrying trash along the way. Wind and rain can also contribute to the issue by transporting trash into storm drains, which can empty directly into waterways. Through this water network, trash on city streets can travel hundreds, even thousands of miles from inland areas of the country to our coasts and oceans.

Harmful Effects

Trash in our waterways has a direct impact on nearby communities. Broken glass, discarded needles, and trash laden with bacteria or chemicals can injure people or make them sick. Litter-filled waters hurt local economies by discouraging fishing, boating, and other recreational activities and burdening taxpayers. Local governments spend millions of dollars every year cleaning up litter. For example, Los Angeles County, California, spends over \$18 million annually to clean up and prevent litter (*Inside Solid Waste, 2011*). Trash and litter also can impact wildlife. Animals can become entangled, or mistake harmful litter for food.

Trash Travels!



Trash is thrown on or falls to the ground



Rain and wind carry trash to storm drains or directly to waterbodies



Trash in storm drains travels to streams



Trash in streams travels to rivers



Trash in rivers travels to the ocean



As trash travels, it can impact people, animals, the environment, and the economy.

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Single Use Products and our Waterways

From coast to coast, single use items are clogging up our nation's waterways. However, a growing number of communities are doing something about it. For example, some U.S. cities and counties are instituting bans on plastic bags, while others are taxing the bags and using the proceeds for urban waters restoration. In 2010, Washington, D.C. became the first U.S. city to enforce a bag tax, charging 5 cents for each paper or plastic bag. The move led to an immediate drop in bag usage and produced revenue to help clean up the Anacostia River (*District Department of the Environment*).

What is EPA Doing?

Through outreach and education, research, and new program partnerships, EPA is working to reduce the amount of trash and litter that enters our streams, rivers, lakes, and oceans. EPA's Trash Free Waters Program and Urban Waters Movement are helping people to clean up and revitalize polluted local waterways in order to return them to treasured centerpieces of the community. Restoration efforts to remove trash in urban areas are helping communities reap the economic and social benefits that come from having clean, accessible waterways.

How Can You Help?

- Reduce, reuse, and recycle. Using less, finding creative ways to reuse materials, and recycling more will reduce the potential for waste to end up in your waterways. To learn more, please visit epa.gov/recycle.
- Volunteer for a cleanup. The Ocean Conservancy's International Coastal Cleanup removes millions of pounds of debris from our nation's urban and coastal waters each year. Please visit signuptocleanup.org to sign up for a cleanup event in your area!
- Take action wherever you are. People like you are taking steps to reduce the amount of trash they generate. To learn more about what you can do at home, school, the office, and other places, visit water.epa.gov/type/oceb/marinedebris and click on "What You Can Do."

To Learn More

Trash Free Waters:
water.epa.gov/type/oceb/marinedebris

Urban Waters:
epa.gov/urbanwaters

Ocean Conservancy:
oceanconservancy.org

Top 10 Trash Items

Most of the trash in our nation's waters is made up of disposable items we use every day. The items listed below made up 80 percent of the more than 9 million pounds of trash collected during the 2011 International Coastal Cleanup (*Ocean Conservancy, Trash Free Seas 2012 Report*).

1. Cigarettes & cigarette filters
2. Caps & lids
3. Plastic beverage bottles
4. Plastic Bags
5. Food wrappers & containers
6. Cups, plates, forks, knives, & spoons
7. Glass beverage bottles
8. Straws & stirrers
9. Beverage cans
10. Paper bags



Credit: Ocean Conservancy