

The Great Pacific Garbage Patch

by Cindy Eusey

Earth Day is over, or is it? Each year many countries around the world set aside a day in April to celebrate the earth. People plant trees, recycle their plastics and aluminum cans, become more aware of pollution and attend Earth Day events. When Earth Day is over, most people fall back into their same routines.

Let me ask... What actions do you take to be a protector of the environment? Could you do more? Here is some food for thought. Did you ever hear of the Great Pacific Garbage Patch? The North Pacific Subtropical Gyre is a slow moving clockwise spiral of currents between the North American and Asian continents. The garbage patch is 1000 miles west of San Francisco and 1000 miles north of Hawaii. This area is an oceanic desert, filled with tiny phytoplankton but few big fish or mammals. Because of lack of larger fish and mammals, boats and fishing vessels rarely travel through this area. However, what does collect in the middle of this "toilet bowl" effect is TRASH! There are millions of pounds of it, mostly plastic. It is considered the largest landfill in the world. Scientists estimate its size to be twice the size of Texas! The floating plastic is just below the surface and has been measured from one inch to 300 feet in depth.

Where does it come from? Twenty percent comes from private and commercial ships, oil platforms, fishing equipment and spilled shipping containers. Eighty percent comes from the land. Plastic bottles, plastic bags, plastic cigarette lighters cases are just a few of the types of plastics found in this soupy environmental mess. Instead of bio degrading, the floating plastics "photo degrade". This means that they get brittle and crack into smaller pieces. Some pieces can become very tiny although they never go away and are impossible to skim out of the water.

Wildlife mistakes these smaller pieces as food and will ingest the plastic. In some cases marine birds try to feed it to their young. With no nutritional value, thousands of adult birds and their chicks are starving to death. Other marine wildlife such as seals, whales, dolphins and fish get tangled in discarded fishing lines, old automobile tires and other plastics that find their way to this garbage island. The impact on wildlife and the environment is tremendous!

As the production and the use of plastic continues to grow, so will the Garbage Patch. Charles Moore, a marine researcher who has studied the garbage patch for 10 years said, "The only way to reduce marine debris is to cut it off at its source - on land."

Can you do more? Try to make a little more effort to recycle plastic, especially plastic bottles and bags. Cover your load when going to the landfill. Help clean up the plastics from your neighborhoods. Don't let your plastic become garbage in a waterway! Make everyday Earth Day.

For more information, Google "The Great Pacific Garbage Patch".