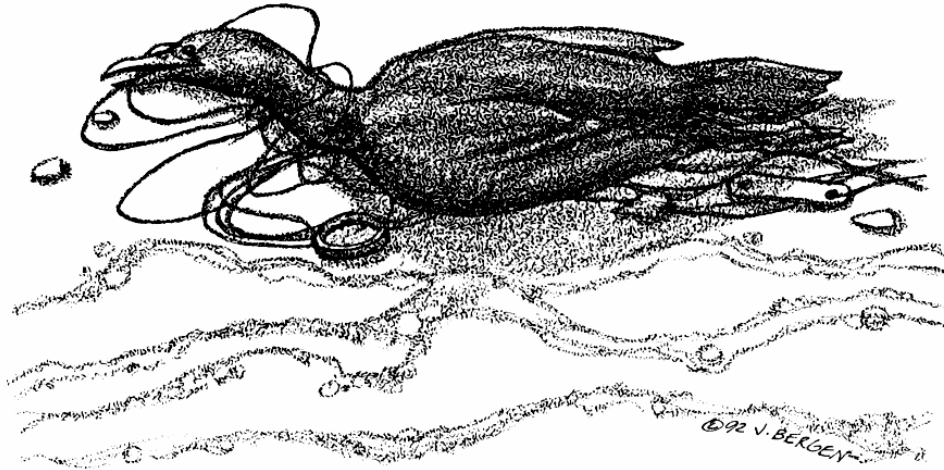


Plastics Threaten the Marine Environment

by Kenn Oberrecht



So bad is the international marine trash problem that along the Texas coast alone, 30 tons of garbage, most of it from foreign merchant ships, washes onto the beaches from the Gulf of Mexico every day. A one-

mile stretch of Texas beach that volunteers cleaned up at dusk one day was littered by the following morning with another 167 pounds of garbage that had washed in overnight.

During the 1990 National Beach Cleanup, Texas beaches yielded a whopping 2,508 pounds of trash per mile.

Currents are such in the partly enclosed Gulf of Mexico that they carry marine debris, most of it plastic, for great distances and deposit it along Texas's 624-mile coastline. During the 1990 National Beach Cleanup, Texas beaches yielded a whopping 2,508 pounds of trash per mile.

In neighboring Louisiana, it's even worse, with trash drifting down the Mississippi River from inland areas only to join inbound garbage tumbling ashore on nearly every breaking wave. A newsletter published by the Louisiana Sea Grant College Program reported on findings of two researchers who studied the problem, which is severe enough to have earned Louisiana the unenviable nickname, "The Litter State." Among all the locally generated junk the researchers found on the beaches in their study area were "rice bags from India, soft-drink cans from Singapore, chili pepper cans from Thailand, and even a plastic bottle of bathroom cleaner from Russia."

Aluminum beverage cans tossed into the water usually sink to the bottom, where they function as efficient traps for small fish, shellfish, and other creatures. They're also likely to last for at least a couple of centuries.

It's no wonder that of the states participating in the beach cleanup held in the fall of 1990, Louisiana had the dubious honor of being littered with the greatest density of trash 3,289 pounds per mile.

Garbage, whatever its form, is always ugly, but some of it is also dangerous. Most of it promises to last for centuries as a continuing threat to the environment.

Aluminum beverage cans tossed into the water usually sink to the bottom, where they function as efficient traps for small fish, shellfish, and other creatures. They're also likely to last for at least a couple of centuries.

Plastic poses one of the greatest and long-lasting threats to wildlife. Nylon gillnet lost at sea keeps right on fishing, and it also entangles sea birds and mammals. A snarl of monofilament line discarded by a careless angler can become a deathtrap for birds and mammals. Plastic six-pack yokes, more efficient than a hangman's noose, have strangled countless fish, birds, and sea mammals.

Coastal states spend millions of dollars every year cleaning up all this plastic and other litter, to protect not only the wildlife but also the multi-billion-dollar tourist industry it threatens.

The plastics threat has reached crisis proportions around the world and doesn't promise to soon subside. Ever-increasing plastics production and application can only compound the problem.

Plastic is so lightweight, strong, durable, and long-lasting that it has replaced many other manufacturing materials throughout the world. In the United States, we produce about twice as much plastic as all the steel, aluminum, and copper put together.

Plastic has become so much a part of our lives that we aren't likely to reduce our use of it. We have no choice but to find efficient ways of disposing it.

~ ~ ~