

Cleaning Up Bolsa Chica

By Marinka Horack

One of the most important goals of the Bolsa Chica Land Trust is the restoration of the wetlands and mesa into a clean, healthy, and life-productive ecosystem. And one of the biggest challenges to achieving this goal is the constant barrage of trash and urban runoff that inundates Bolsa Chica every day. It comes from two sources. The first is Pacific Coast Highway where people carelessly throw trash from their cars. The ocean breezes then blow the debris in from the beach, covering Bolsa Chica with plastic bags, candy wrappers, and coffee cups.



The second source is the Wintersburg Flood Control Channel, perhaps Bolsa Chica's most insidious source for trash and pollution. This channel drains 22 square miles of Orange County's excess storm water. It starts in east Garden Grove and terminates at Bolsa Chica. Unfortunately, storm water picks up the trash and pollutants in the streets as it flows into sidewalk storm drains and into the flood control channel. This urban runoff forms a poisonous soup which includes car oils, gasoline, brake fluids, garden fertilizers, pesticides, animal wastes, toxic household chemicals, dirty diapers, plastic bottles, cigarette butts, illegal commercial toxins, styrofoam, etc.

Wetlands are Mother Nature's natural purifiers and much of this pollution is cleaned up through the action of the sunlight on the shallow waters, but too much trash and toxics overwhelms the system. While paper can decompose in a matter of months, other trash takes years to decompose. Aluminum cans take up to 500 years. And styrofoam never decomposes!

Styrofoam may just be the most deadly debris in the history of mankind. It has been around for about 60 years, yet it's everywhere now. The sheer volume of styrofoam trash makes it a huge threat to wildlife. Since it never decomposes, it remains in the environment forever. Birds, fish, and mammals think it is food and consume it. When styrofoam fills the stomachs of animals, they eventually starve to death. Not a pretty story.

The Algalita Marine Research Foundation has sent scientific research vessels to the Central Pacific. They found that some areas of the ocean have as much as 6 pounds of plastic particle trash for every 1 pound of natural zooplankton. Our planet's food chain has been poisoned. Even whales and dolphins have become victims. For a short, eye-opening video called "Synthetic Sea: Plastics in the Open Ocean," click on the website: http://www.algalita.org/pelagic_plastic_mov

What can we do? We must stop using styrofoam. That's a tall order, but it has happened in some places. Many large fast food chains no longer use styrofoam. In 2008, the City of Newport Beach, in cooperation with the city's restaurants, passed an ordinance which outlaws the use of styrofoam. The heroes of this action were students from Newport Harbor High School. They lobbied the restaurants and city officials to pass this ordinance. And in our own lives, we can refuse to buy and use styrofoam. And we can help educate others.

The BCLT's "Miracles of the Marsh" tours include a lesson about pollution and trash. It is gratifying to see the reaction of the children when they see wall-to-wall trash in the Wintersburg Channel. They are appalled and demand to know why the trash is there and why it is not cleaned up. Children look to the future, and when they are informed, they are not afraid to act. The students of Newport Harbor High are a shining example.

Congratulations to them! Let's hope they inspire a movement all around.