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The Perils of Our Garbage

Thank you for the opportunity to give our wildlife a voice regarding the improper disposal of our garbage. Although garbage improperly disposed of anywhere is a problem, my focus is mainly on the beaches and oceans. Our wildlife, to include fish, birds and mammals, suffer from the careless disposal of our debris. Marine trash is killing more than a million seabirds and 100,000 mammals and sea turtles each year (Leahy). It is estimated that 80% of our debris is from land-based sources and the other 20% is from ocean-based sources (Allsop).

Over the past year, I have worked diligently to try to reduce ocean pollution. I have hosted 22 individual cleanups and 3 community cleanups, including the International Coastal Cleanup for our largest public beach in York, Maine. I have witnessed firsthand many types of debris that land and ocean species have either ingested or have experienced terrible types of entanglement. Fishing line, balloons, strapping, and plastics can wrap around limbs, fins and beaks and entrap our precious wildlife. After cleaning one of our public beaches recently, I witnessed a dead seagull with a piece of packing tape wrapped around his neck. Obviously, the tape hindered his ability to fly and the bird drowned. Last summer, I witnessed a live bird with a fish hook piercing his beak and the line wrapped around his legs. He must have tried to remove the sharp lure with his claws and then further entangled his body and legs. With help from adults, we cut the fishing line in many different places and then pulled it through his wounds and removed the line. We saved his life but entanglement or entrapment is typically an excruciating death for our wildlife.

There are many dangers with plastic garbage in our oceans. Marine species may consider it food since it looks similar to smaller aquatic life, or perhaps may even look like jellyfish (Leahy). Blue Ocean Society for Marine Conservation has documented cases of animals that have eaten plastics. In 2006, there was a pigmy sperm whale that washed up on a beach in Maine and the autopsy results show a plastic bag in its stomach (Phalon). Balloons are very detrimental to wildlife and have been eaten by whales or turtles where they clog the animals intestinal tracts and make it impossible to eat normally (Kennedy). However, the good news is that last year we picked up and properly disposed of many plastics on our local beaches to include 399 bottles, 619 bottle caps, 334 bags, 179 balloons, and 171 strapping/fishing lines. We have also picked up serious items to include 6 pack rings, bleach and oil containers and other dumping items, such as building materials and tires.

In order to get people involved in ocean pollution prevention (since I can't do the beach cleanups by myself), I have started a "beach lovers" group which helps with the cleanups and provides ideas to further reduce the sources of garbage. I have encouraged membership of the team through our local newspapers and an email virtual group. Until this past year, no one was really aware of the amount of pollution on our local beaches. Also working with the "beach lovers" group, I have started a "source analysis" and I am trying to partner with groups and businesses that can help reduce the different types of garbage. I have contacted many local groups and they help share the beach cleanups through their organizations. There are condo associations, schools, clubs, scouts and friends that regularly help clean the beaches. Our town is also providing more garbage cans, and recyclable containers on our beaches.

On a broader approach to reduce the garbage, I have also written to several major corporation CEO's and asked them to partner with cleaner oceans. I have written to Nestle Waters on developing eco-friendly bottles as well as attaching bottle caps. Mr. Jeffery, the CEO of Nestle Waters, notes in his letter to me that "our new Eco-shape bottle which is 15% lighter than our last one and about 30% lighter than most ½ liter bottles has a new label which asks people to recycle" (Jeffery). He further writes about my request for attached bottle caps. "The second request is much harder to accomplish. We are working with a supplier to design a top which pops but doesn't screw and which is attached to the bottle. This will take at least two years if it happens at all but stay tuned" (Jeffery). I am very pleased that large corporations are trying to make environmentally friendly changes and he notes in the end of the letter, "Thanks for caring enough to write. We also care".

I have also written to the President of Altria and asked for their cigarette boxes to note proper disposal of cigarette butts and to fabricate the liner into a disposable ashtray. Last year, we picked up 4,260 cigarette butts. I have contacted the CEO's of Remax and Century 21 to notify all of their real estate franchises to remove balloons after open houses so they don't end up in our ocean. We continue to look for ways to change the main sources of our garbage problem.

In summary, I feel so strongly about the safety of our wildlife in our oceans and that we need to keep our beaches and oceans in their *natural* state. This means that the environment needs to be clean and the waters need to flow without encumbrances of garbage. Our community must act responsibly because clean water for all of us is our most vital need and no living species should suffer from the carelessness of our garbage.

Respectfully submitted,

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