

thoughts & views

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The great Pacific Garbage Patch stinks

By Ron Leir

You may recall that scene in the 1967 film "The Graduate," where Benjamin Braddock's neighbor (played by Murray Hamilton) tells Benjamin (Dustin Hoffman) there's a big future in plastics.

Off-screen, that projection was dead on.

The Plastics Industry Association has reported that the trade accounts for total annual revenues exceeding \$400 billion and more than 900,000 jobs in the U.S.

By the PIA's reckoning, those numbers make plastics the eighth biggest industry in this country.

You want more proof? Just take a look at your local streets and sidewalks or your area beaches where a wide variety of discarded plastic products can be easily found.

Do I have to draw you a picture?

OK, then, go directly to the internet and punch in "Pacific plastic island" or some variation on the same and prepare to be shocked.

There, you'll read about a phenomenon that goes under several names, the most common of which is "Great Pacific Garbage Patch."

As explained by the National Geographic Society website, the "patch" – a massive conglomeration of marine debris "almost entirely made up of tiny bits of plastic called microplastics ... intermixed with larger items, such as fishing gear and shoes," car-



Plastics, from the 'Great Pacific Garbage Patch,' litter a beach in Singapore.

Wikipedia

ried by North Pacific currents.

Much of the plastic debris, according to the NGS, originated from discarded plastic bags, bottle caps, plastic water bottles and Styrofoam cups.

What's extraordinary about this mass – credit for its discovery in 1997 goes to racing boat captain Charles Moore who was sailing from Hawaii to California when his vessel was surrounded by literally millions of pieces of the floating heap.

Not quite the elation Henry Hudson must have felt when that explorer sailed up the great river but certainly the element of great surprise.

How big this soupy mass no one can reliably say but,

according to the NGS, "Scientists have collected up to 750,000 bits of microplastics in a single square kilometer of [the patch] – that's about 1.9 million bits per square mile."

What's more, there's more than what can be seen at the surface: the NGS notes scientists have found that "about 70% of marine debris actually sinks to the bottom of the ocean."

Most of the mass's contents are believed to have come from "land-based activities in North America and Asia," and the rest "from boaters, off-shore oil rigs and large cargo ships that dump or lose debris directly into the water."

Moore, whose environmental organization, the Algalita Marine Research Foundation,

used aerial drones to try and measure the mass, concluded that any cleanup effort would "bankrupt any country."

Why even bother removing the non-biodegradable stuff?

NGS explains: Loggerhead sea turtles mistake plastic – which can absorb toxins like PCBs from seawater – for their favorite food, jellies; albatrosses confuse resin pellets with fish eggs and feed them to chicks which die. Seals, turtles and other creatures get tangled in abandoned fishing nets and sometimes drown.

Beyond that, the patch can "block sunlight from reaching plankton and algae below [the ocean's surface]," thereby depriving fish and turtles of nutrients. If their populations

drop, there will, in turn, be less food for predators like tuna, sharks and whales.

And there's always a chance that we can be adversely affected if we eat any fish that have been compromised by pollutants.

Moral of the story: When you have an opportunity to pitch in to help our environment, do it!

Notable examples are the annual spring sweeps of the banks of the Passaic River organized by the town of Kearny – with Councilwoman Carol Jean Doyle at the helm and with help from the Passaic Valley Sewerage Commission's River Restoration Program – supplemented by town cleanups conducted by the Woman's Club of Arlington with Jane Mackesy at the helm.

Time is growing short for our planet. As reported by July 20 issue of The New York Times, world-wide, 8.3 billion metric tons of plastic have been produced since the 1950s, used in packaging, building and construction, with much of that having ended up in landfills, oceans or in city streets.

The paper cited scientists' estimates that "5 million to 13 million metric tons enter the ocean each year," triggering pollution, ultimately, of rivers and streams, as well as on land. Recycling helps alleviate the potential woes from plastic but with production ever-increasing, it's only a bandage on an open sore.

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