



## Labor Day Celebration for the Environment

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Over Labor Day weekend, thousands of sunburned Californians reveled at the state's scenic riverbanks and beaches for three days of ritualized recreation. The annual holiday honors the positive contribution of working people to society, yet ironically, leaves a more negative one. Working people at play leave garbage, including plastics, which have disastrous consequences for marine life.

Much of the plastic and other debris littered on land enters the waterways through storm drains and other runoffs. Through a process called photodegradation, plastic breaks down into smaller particles, but unlike other debris, it does not biodegrade. The Algalita Marine Research Foundation in Southern California has found that in the central North Pacific, broken, degraded plastic pieces outweigh surface zooplankton – microscopic marine animals essential to the food chain – by a factor of 6 to 1.

One concern is that food packaging floating in the water looks deceptively similar to real marine life, and ingesting this debris causes a host of problems for feeding animals, from false feelings of satiation to a buildup of toxic chemicals and hormonal imbalance. Sea turtles mistake billowing plastic bags for jellyfish; foil chewing gum wrappers reflect like silver fish. Surface-feeding seabirds inadvertently ingest fish eggs stuck to floating plastic; researchers at the Cordell Bank National Marine Sanctuary tagging migrating albatross have found undigested fragments of fishing line, cigarette lighters and broken toys in the regurgitated food that adult birds serve their chicks.

What are we to do? California Coastal Cleanup Day, a kind of Labor Day for the environment, will take place across the state on September 18. Organizers of the annual one-day event, which is part of a coordinated international effort involving all 50 U.S. states and more than 90 countries, expect 50,000 volunteers to heed the call for environmental stewardship of their local coastline and inland shores.

Eben Schwartz, Statewide Outreach Coordinator for the California Coastal Commission and one of the organizers of the 20th annual event, promises a good time for the volunteers who show up to clear trash and debris from 2,100 miles of the California coast and inland bays, rivers and lakes.

"You can't keep anything going for 20 years unless people are having fun doing it," he said. "It's a social event, and at the same time a fun and easy effort to take care of the environment." By day's end last year, volunteers collected 861,089 pounds of debris – and a contest is held for the most unusual piece of trash (a Civil War-era boot recently took top honors).

Jeff Hvid, of San Anselmo, is among the hundreds of Marin residents who will be attending the local cleanup. But for Hvid, the day will be a familiar routine: in the past two years, he has done 125 solo cleanups at pullouts, in ravines, along creeks and on the beaches of Marin County. His

sculptures of the collected debris, which he assembled to raise awareness of illegal dumping, will be showing at the SF Bay Model in Sausalito later this month. What drives this near obsession for Hvid is a mixture of frustration at public apathy and self-assigned stewardship.

“I’m not really a saint, but I am interested in the environment,” he says. “I raise my kids here and believe it’s the best place in the world to live. Plastic, freon, fiberglass, styrofoam – it’s all bad for plants, all bad for animals, all bad for us. And since plants and animals didn’t put it there, and can’t take it out, I do.”