



MAS NOTE

From the University of Delaware Sea Grant Marine Advisory Service

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PLASTIC POLLUTION IN THE MARINE ENVIRONMENT: BOATERS CAN HELP CONTROL A GROWING PROBLEM

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Since the days of ancient Phoenician mariners, seagoers have been dumping their trash at sea. Back in those days, the oceans could easily handle the waste, but today, both the nature and the quantity of trash have changed. Today, what gets tossed overboard can have a deadly impact on marine life and cause problems for other boaters.

Plastic, the wonder material that we use for everything, is perhaps the most harmful of this trash because it does not readily break down in nature. In fact, the plastic that goes over the side today may still be around in hundreds of years to foul up the fishing gear, boat propellers, and beaches of future generations, not to mention what it will do to countless generations of marine life and seabirds that eat it or get tangled up in it.

Careless disposal of plastics can have dire consequences. The six-pack ring, which relieves us of having to juggle six cans at once, can become a deadly noose for a bird or fish. A plastic bag looks like a tasty jellyfish to an indiscriminate feeder like the sea turtle, but plastic is indigestible. It can choke, block the intestines of, or cause infection in those animals that consume it. A plastic bag can also clog an outboard engine's cooling system. Lost or discarded monofilament fishing line can foul propellers, destroying oil seals and lower units on engines, or it can become an entangling web for fish, seabirds, and marine mammals.

According to the Center for Marine Conservation, over 25,000 pieces of fishing line were collected from U.S. beaches during the 1996 annual beach cleanup, and at least 40% of all animal entanglements reported during the cleanups involved fishing line.

Every day, more and more plastic is accumulating in our oceans. Recreational boaters are not the only group that improperly disposes of plastic refuse at sea. Plastics also enter the marine environment from sewage outfalls, merchant shipping, commercial fishing operations, and beachgoers.

Plastics pose a serious enough threat to the marine environment that, in 1987, Congress enacted the Marine Plastic Pollution Research and Control Act. This law prohibits the dumping of plastics in all U.S. waters and applies to all watercraft — from the smallest recreational boat to the largest commercial ship. In addition, marinas are required to maintain adequate facilities for the disposal of refuse regulated under this act.

You can do something to reduce plastic pollution.

- ♦ Make it a rule that *no* trash goes overboard, *especially old fishing line*, which is particularly hazardous to marine life.
- ♦ Substitute reusable containers and other items for disposable ones to reduce the volume of trash.
- ♦ Stow your trash for proper disposal in port.

Plastic really is fantastic. The problem is improper disposal. Remember that a careless moment may last for generations.

