

Trash Pollution in California's Waterways

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California's beaches are beautiful, but a closer look shows something crystal clear: trash pollution in water is a major problem, and the State and Regional Water Boards are working hard to solve it.

Trash is polluting beaches, the ocean, bays, rivers, streams, and lakes. For humans, trash poses a safety concern because it contains harmful bacteria and viruses that can make people sick. Trash injures and kills birds and marine life, and it destroys the habitats where they live.

To some fish, these tiny plastic pellets look like food, and scientists are finding more and more plastic inside fish.

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Fish, birds, and sea turtles mistake litter for food. Some starve to death because eating plastic tricks them into thinking they've had enough to eat.

Most of the trash that ends up in water was first left on land. Rain and water runoff carry the trash into local waterways from places like streets, parks, beaches, parking lots, and from uncovered and overflowing trash cans.

Studies show that most of the trash found in water includes plastics such as bags and utensils, as well as polystyrene foam containers, bottle caps, and cigarette butts.

Environmental Scientist:

"As an environmental scientist, I've done a lot of work looking at trash around the state, reviewing studies done by other people about trash—not only in the state, but around the country and around the world. It's much more common in urbanized areas, and the studies we've done have shown it's very abundant in places where lots of people live."

That's why there are severe trash problems in waterways in metropolitan areas like Los Angeles, San Francisco, San Diego, and Orange County.

"The best way we can control it is by preventing it from getting into the ocean, into the bays, and into our lakes and rivers. We want to prevent that from happening."

The Los Angeles Regional Water Board became the first in the nation to require cities and other municipalities to reduce and prevent trash from entering waterways.

Los Angeles Regional Water Board Representative:

"Back in the mid-1990s, when the L.A. Water Board staff were doing their annual surveys of water bodies, we started noticing an increase in the amount of trash in and along our waterways. In particular, we noticed trash in highly used recreation areas in the Angeles National Forest, where many people go to recreate during the hot summer days inland. We also noticed more trash at the beaches and in some of our urban watersheds."

Communities have choices for complying with the regulations. Some are installing devices beneath storm drains that trap trash and prevent it from flowing into waterways, and they're reporting high success rates in keeping the water clean.

"The regulations have driven innovation in terms of technologies, and these new technologies are continuing to evolve to make even further improvements."

Reducing trash in all of California's waterways is a priority for the State Water Board and the nine Regional Water Boards.

State Water Board Representative:

"The reason the State Water Board develops regulations is to provide a clear and consistent framework statewide. By having a regulation in place, municipalities know what they need to do and how to go about it. With our plans and policies, we never tell people how to accomplish what we want—we simply tell them what needs to be done, and they figure out the most cost-effective way to do it."

"I don't think the trash problem can be solved on its own. We have some of the most beautiful water bodies in the state. We've got beautiful coastlines, beautiful bays, beautiful lakes, and beautiful rivers. People come to California to enjoy our water bodies, and the people who live here enjoy them too. It's really important that we protect those water bodies."

The State and Regional Water Boards are doing their job to protect water quality from trash pollution. We can help, too, by cleaning up after ourselves—throwing garbage into cans and dumpsters instead of on the ground, at the beach, or in the water.

By working together, we help protect the water we drink, the water in which we swim, fish, and play, as well as the birds, aquatic life, and marine life whose survival depends on clean water.

[Applause]

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