

Downplaying Plastic Trash in the Ocean (Conservancy)

Contributed by Jan Lundberg
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Culture Change Letter #241 - A widely reported story on ocean trash cites the huge Ocean Conservancy group. The group's new report misleads, in that it avoids concluding that the trash problem facing the ocean is overwhelmingly one of plastic.

Trash that biodegrades is hardly a problem compared to the non-biodegradable plastic from petroleum.

Almost all plastic is petroleum based, sometimes with added poisons such as heavy metals or even radioactive materials. Non-petroleum plastic from plants is on a very small scale and is not the biodegradable-friendly substance advertised, in almost every case.

Petroleum needs to be boycotted. This starts to get at the lifestyle issue that leads to the destruction of the oceans (and our air and soil and bodies). Addressing plastic -- a new substance in human history, that we can live without -- is a great way to start dealing with petroleum on which modern society is entirely, perilously dependent.

In the news article, titled "Tidal wave of trash threatens world oceans" by Reuters, the statements made by Ocean Conservancy (with lack of follow up by Reuters) allow us to think that all we have to do is put our trash in the bins and do our recycling in order to save the oceans.

When it comes to fundamental disorders, we don't expect corporate media or mainstream-funded environmental organizations to mention the fact that there are too many people. But until societies deal with population growth and overpopulation, the oceans and ourselves are cooked. Meanwhile, since petroleum has been feeding the growing populations, and plastic is a petroleum product, let's get real.

I asked Captain Charles Moore, founder of Algalita Marine Research Foundation, who discovered the Garbage Patches in the northern Pacific Ocean about Ocean Conservancy and its de-emphasizing plastic. His answer: "The Ocean Conservancy gets its bags for the cleanup donated by the plastics industry, and they are careful not to be critical of it."

Maybe this has something to do with the Ocean Conservancy's clearing over \$18 million in revenue (2007 financial report). The sources of funds were

not listed. CEO Vikki N. Spruill was paid \$200,000. Ocean Conservancy does have a lot of protection programs according to the website, and maybe we'd all be lost without their work. However, in Culture Change's two decades of activism, we've found that compromise often holds back the environmental movement.

Algalita through its flagship research vessel the Algalita has discovered, to everyone's dismay, is that it is impossible to ever clean the plastic up or remove it from the oceans due to the fine breakdown of plastic and the magnitude of the problem. This means our only realistic course is to cut plastic off at the source: industrial society's producing and consuming it. This means doing it now, which the Ocean Conservancy might agree (even if privately) would be nice. Cleaning up a beaches is important, but most of the plastic remains swirling in the oceans, such as the clockwise gyre current comprising most of the northern Pacific.

Aside from identifying plastic bags, the Ocean Conservancy's new report and the website avoid the use of the word "plastic," leading one away from the realization that we are dealing foremost with a plastic disaster more than a trash issue. One reason for this spin is that the Ocean Conservancy is in favor of bioplastic -- the mono-crop high-petroleum method of growing plants for plastic. Not only is land needed for growing food and for wildlife habitat instead, bioplastics are not very biodegradable: they need perfect conditions for that, and their content can be as high as 75% petroleum plastic. A feature of the Ocean Conservancy's report is "Seek better technological solutions to debris management and reduction" -- with a photo of a cornfield and a plastic bottle. Hello?

Rather than simply trash a trash report, we advocate effective action:

- 1) agitate for bans of plastic grocery bags (or place fees on them),
- 2) ban other plastics such as bisphenol-A and PVC, and
- 3) cease the purchase of plastics and petroleum in general.

The ramifications of the last item above will be as massive and ecologically healthy as the current Depression's effects to decrease exports from China -- down a whopping 26% in February.

Tidal wave of trash threatens world oceans

March 10, 2009

MIAMI (Reuters) - A tidal wave of man-made trash is threatening world oceans, damaging wildlife, tourism and seafood industries and piling additional stress on seas already hit by climate change,

conservationists said on Tuesday.

A report by U.S.-based Ocean Conservancy detailed what it called a "global snapshot of marine debris" based on itemized records of rubbish collected by nearly 400,000 volunteers in 104 countries and places in a single day in September 2008.

Close to 7 million pounds (3.2 million kg) of trash -- the weight of 18 blue whales -- was collected from oceans, lakes, rivers and waterways in the 2008 cleanup, the group said in its report "A Rising Tide of Ocean Debris and What We Can Do About It".

It warned of a "tidal wave of ocean debris," calling it a major pollution problem of the 21st century.

Topping the list of the 11.4 million items of trash collected were cigarette butts, plastic bags, and food wrappers and containers. In the Philippines alone, 11,077 diapers were picked up and 19,504 fishing nets were recovered in Britain.

"Our ocean is sick, and our actions have made it so," Vikki Spruill, president and chief executive of Ocean Conservancy, said in a statement accompanying the report.

"We simply cannot continue to put our trash in the ocean. The evidence turns up every day in dead and injured marine life, littered beaches that discourage tourists, and choked ocean ecosystems," she said.

"By changing behaviors and policies, individuals, companies, and governments can help improve the health of our ocean, the Earth's life support system."

The full report, including a country-by-country Marine Debris Index,

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ANIMALS KILLED, TOURISM HURT

Detailing how refuse poisoned oceans and waterways, the report said the waste entered the food chain, injured beachgoers and weakened economies by sapping precious dollars from tourism and seafood industries.

Thousands of animals, including marine mammals, sea turtles, seabirds and others, choked or were poisoned each year by eating trash, or drowned when they became entangled in bags, ropes and old fishing gear.

The 2008 cleanup volunteers found 443 animals entangled or trapped by marine debris, releasing 268 alive.

"Keeping our ocean free of trash is one of the easiest ways we can help improve the ocean's resilience as it tries to adapt to the harmful effects of climate change such as melting ice, rising sea levels, and changing ocean chemistry," Ocean Conservancy said.

It recommended public and private partnerships to monitor and reduce marine trash and increased funding for research on the problem. A policy of "reduce, reuse, recycle" would help lower trash levels, combined with technological solutions.

"Trash doesn't fall from the sky, it falls from our hands," Spruill said. "Humans have created the problem of marine debris, and humans should step up and solve it."

Ocean Conservancy said its next International Coastal Cleanup would be held around the world on September 19.

(Reporting by Pascal Fletcher; Editing by Jim Loney and John O'Callaghan)

References:

Reuters ocean trash story

Ocean Conservancy trash report
"A Rising Tide of Ocean Debris and
What We Can Do About It"

* The Marine Debris Index: The Annual Country-by-Country, State-by-State Breakdown of Trash in Our Ocean and Waterways

* Marine Debris Impacts on Water, Wildlife, and Climate Change

* Key Findings and Recommendations

Algalita Marine Research Foundation

Culture Change section on the Plastic Plague

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