



Media Release – 22 August 2011

Litter...Dropped on Land, Kills at Sea

Keep Australia Beautiful Week kicks off today with a graphic reminder of the catastrophic consequences that litter can have on Australia's waterways and wildlife.

According to figures released today in the annual Keep Australia Beautiful National Litter Index, the total amount of litter by item and by volume recorded a slight drop per 1000m² overall nationally.

However, Keep Australia Beautiful warns that the reduction in some litter items may in fact be attributed to the exceptional wet conditions experienced in many areas of Australia simply washing away the lighter litter items from the streets, into nearby storm water drains and waterways where they can't be recorded.

This not only moves the problem elsewhere, but also poses a greater environmental risk in terms of marine pollution and injuring or killing marine mammals and other wildlife.

Cigarette butts remain the most frequently identified litter item with 29 butts recorded per 1000m², whilst plastic litter objects contributed the largest amount of volume to the litter stream with a national average of 1.95 litres.

According to Keep Australia Beautiful National Spokeswoman, Lara Shannon, "Each year, millions of items such as cigarette butts, plastic and glass beverage containers, food packaging and fishing gear make their way into our oceans and rivers through storm water drains, or by being left on beaches and river banks."

"Marine litter poses a vast and growing threat to the marine and coastal environment with at least 77 species of marine wildlife found in Australian waters being affected. Sea turtles, seabirds, dolphins and sea lions particularly vulnerable", Shannon added.

Tim Silverwood is an environmentalist from the Central Coast of NSW and co-founder of 'Take 3 – A Clean Beach Initiative'. Silverwood has teamed with Keep Australia Beautiful to highlight what is happening out at sea, having just returned from a voyage across the Pacific Ocean from Honolulu to Vancouver to document the North Pacific Gyre, otherwise known as the Great Pacific Garbage Patch. Twice the size of France and growing exponentially, this sea of rubbish is threatening to become one of the great ecological disasters of our time.

"Attempting to understand the Garbage Patch is incredibly difficult", says Silverwood. "Not only is it enormous, but it is amorphous and unpredictable. The voyage travelled 2995 miles from Honolulu to Vancouver across some of the remotest ocean on the planet where the research team completed 38 trawl samples of the ocean's surface."

“The presence of plastic in every trawl sample we completed was shocking, heartbreaking and intriguing. Even in the middle of the North Pacific Ocean, thousands of kilometres from the nearest land mass, we were finding plastic debris.”

“We were sampling a minute, wafer thin line of ocean and still finding evidence of human consumption including a toothbrush, pen caps, bottle caps and even a toy plastic gorilla. There is so much rubbish out there, it's clear we need to act now. We can all make a difference on this issue by taking responsibility for our rubbish by reducing, reusing, recycling and cleaning up our coastline”, Silverwood said.

Closer to home, Ian Hutton OAM, Curator of Lord Howe Island Museum, has also been researching the impact of plastic litter on local birdlife, in particular, the Flesh-Footed Shearwater in and around Lord Howe Island.

According to Hutton, “Seabirds are particularly susceptible to plastics in the marine environment. Small pieces of plastic floating on or near the surface of the ocean can resemble the larvae and adults of crustaceans, fish and squid. Consequently, seabirds mistake plastic for food and ingest it, often in large quantities. This ingestion has a range of lethal consequences.”

"Even on pristine Lord Howe Island, 500 kilometres from the nearest land and with some of the best environmental protection in the world, the seabirds are being impacted by this global problem", Hutton added.

Taking responsibility for our litter is something that we can all do, says Keep Australia Beautiful. Even just one piece of rubbish contributes to the pollution of our oceans and threatens our wildlife.

The Hungry Jack's 'Bag it and Bin it' program is Principal Sponsor of Keep Australia Beautiful Week, with local restaurants featuring marine themed tray liners to remind their customers of the need to dispose of their packaging waste responsibly.

For further information and tips on how you can help keep our waterways litter free visit the KAB Week pages at www.kab.org.au

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Editor's Notes:

For information from the National Litter Index or about KAB Week visit www.kab.org.au