

Litter in our waterways



What is litter?

Litter in our waterways is a serious pollution problem that affects our wildlife, aquatic habitats, water quality and the recreational use of waterways.

Litter is almost any material that is disposed of incorrectly. Litter includes fast food wrappers and drink bottles dropped on the ground, cigarette butts thrown out of the car window, discarded chewing gum, or paint tipped down the drain.

When litter is dropped on land, the wind and rain carry it to stormwater drains which empty into creeks and rivers which then carry it to the ocean. Once litter reaches our waterways, it is very difficult to remove.

Litter in our oceans is called 'marine debris'. Ocean currents can carry marine debris thousands of kilometres around the world. Every year over 7 million tonnes of litter ends up in the world's oceans¹. That is approximately 1.3 million rubbish trucks of litter.

Litter in waterways

Litter in our waterways is a result of human behaviour. South East Queensland (SEQ) has the fastest growing population in Australia. Population growth is one of the main factors contributing to the increasing amount of litter in our waterways.

Waterway litter has become a key issue for the residents of SEQ. In a 2010 Healthy Land & Water community survey, residents highlighted rubbish and litter as the most crucial factor damaging our waterways.

There are many alarming facts about waterway litter in SEQ:

- Studies have found that 30-40% of sea turtles found dead in Moreton Bay have considerable plastic litter in their stomach².
- The Healthy Land & Water Clean Up Program has recorded a 50% increase in the number of plastic water bottles collected from local waterways.
- Brisbane City Council has identified that cigarette butts make up more than 50% of all littered items but discarded chewing gum is emerging as a major issue.



Turtles can be injured or even die if they swallow, or become entangled in, litter



Litter dropped on land can end up in stormwater drains and transported into waterways.



Litter thrown from vehicles is a problem.



Litter dropped at home can travel on ocean surface currents all around the world.

Impact and types of litter

Waterway litter harms and kills marine wildlife, causing the death of at least 100,000 marine mammals including turtles, dugongs and whales, and nearly one million seabirds worldwide, per year¹. Wildlife can become entangled in litter or mistake it for food and eat it, resulting in injury or death. In addition, aquatic habitats such as coral and seagrass beds are also damaged by litter. Not only is litter dangerous for wildlife and aquatic habitats, but it makes our waterways look dirty and unattractive. This reduces the recreational use of waterways and impacts the income received from activities such as tourism.

Plastic

80% of litter in our waterways is made of plastic such as plastic bags, plastic bottles and food wrappers. Most plastic objects never biodegrade, they just break down into smaller and smaller pieces. Plastic generally floats so it can be carried long distances in oceans and deposited on beaches all around the world. Large circular ocean currents concentrate floating litter into one place and cause problems such as 'The Great Pacific Garbage Patch'.

Cigarette butts

An estimated that several trillion cigarette butts (worldwide) are littered every year. Cigarette butts contain toxic chemicals which will start to leach out within an hour of contact with water. Birds and aquatic animals can mistake cigarette butts as food and swallow them, resulting in serious digestive problems that may lead to death.

Paint and chemicals

Liquid litter such as paint and household chemicals contain toxins and chemicals that are hazardous to people and wildlife, and degrade water quality. Even when these products are diluted they should never be tipped down stormwater drains or dumped near waterways.

References:

¹ UNEP Regional Seas Program 2005, Marine Litter: An analytical overview

² Personal communication, Kathy Townsend, UQ Moreton Bay Research Station

How you can help: the 5 R's

REDUCE

- Reduce the packaging in your lunch box.
- Buy things in bulk to reduce the wrapping and packaging.
- Put a 'No Junk Mail' sticker on your letterbox to reduce paper waste.

RE-USE

- Use a refillable water bottle.
- Reuse items that you may otherwise throw away.

RECYCLE

- Recycle as much as possible.
- Recycle empty printer cartridges, mobile phones and batteries.

RENEW

- Choose goods made from renewable resources.

RESPECT

- Respect the environment and dispose of litter correctly.
- Pick up any litter you see.



Plastic bottles litter our waterways



The Healthy Land & Water Clean Up Program removes over 230,000 items of litter from our waterways each year.