



Litter

Fact Sheet No. 17
August 2006



How does litter affect the marine environment?

Discarded litter can have a range of environmental impacts on our marine wildlife and their environment. A survey of islands and coral cays adjacent to the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park found the most common forms of litter to be plastics, rubber, glass and polystyrene.

It is estimated that some 100 000 marine animals including turtles, whales and dugong are killed as a result of plastic litter every year (*Source: Qld EPA*). Marine wildlife can become entangled in rubbish during their normal daily routine or they may be curiously drawn to it, often resulting in strangulation, limb amputation or drowning. Smaller pieces of rubbish, like cigarette butts and fishing hooks can be confused with

prey and swallowed by marine wildlife causing internal blockages, often resulting in starvation and other complications. Sharp objects are also a major concern, as they may be swallowed, causing damage to an animal's mouth, digestive tract and stomach.

Litter in the sea

Seven billion tonnes of various types of litter enter the world's oceans every year. Plastics, which generally make up about 60 per cent of rubbish, are the worst offenders and can last for 10 to 20 years on the ocean floor before decomposing (*Source: Qld EPA*). One of the most common ways for litter to enter the marine environment is from commercial ships and recreational vessels. Litter can accidentally fall, blow or wash from boats. Unfortunately, in

some cases litter is purposely thrown overboard.

Litter from the land

Litter left on the land can also have an adverse affect on the marine environment. Rubbish is washed from streets and pathways into stormwater drains, which eventually drain into our adjacent rivers, streams or even directly into the ocean. Litter left on our beaches and other shoreline areas also has the potential to be blown or washed into our oceans.

How does litter in and near the sea affect us?

Litter can also be harmful to humans. Sharp objects such as glass and rusty metal cans inflict serious injuries if stepped on. Floatable litter may also endanger human life as it can be hazardous to divers, become entangled around boat propellers, or even puncture boat hulls.

There are also many economic impacts from the accumulation of litter on our beaches and shorelines. Litter stranded on beaches and shorelines degrades coastal aesthetics, potentially affecting income generated from tourism. In addition, cleaning up recreational beaches that are littered with rubbish can be very expensive.





Managing litter in the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park

It is an offence to deposit litter in the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park under the *Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Act 1975*. The disposal of plastics anywhere in the world into the sea is prohibited under the *International Convention for the Prevention of Pollution from Ships* (known as *MARPOL 73/78*). *MARPOL 73/78* also prohibits the disposal of all other types of garbage within 12 nautical miles of the outer reef. The law provides for fines of up to \$1.2 million for companies and \$220 000 for individuals illegally discharging garbage at sea.

The Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority (GBRMPA) is actively involved in a number of education programmes through initiatives such as the Reef Guardian Schools and the Reef Guardian Councils Programmes that promote better litter management. Further information regarding the Reef Guardian Schools can be found online at: www.reefED.edu.au/guardians or contact the GBRMPA directly.

What can I do to help?

Stormwater management systems, including sediment and litter traps, are now being installed in many coastal cities and towns to trap litter before it enters the sea. This is expensive and may take years to cover all

stormwater systems. All residents and visitors to coastal areas are therefore encouraged to be mindful of the harm litter can cause to the marine environment.

The following are useful ways you can help to decrease the amount of litter being discharged into our oceans:

- Dispose of all litter and waste appropriately
- Remember that stormwater drains flow straight into our waterways – keep them clear and do not use them as rubbish receptacles
- If you go fishing, make sure you take all of your rubbish home with you
- Do not wash your car on the road or driveway because



the detergent and oil will wash down the stormwater drain and flow into the ocean

- Reduce the number of plastic bags and packaging you receive when buying goods and make sure you reuse your plastic bags
- Pass on the message to others about the dangers of rubbish to marine animals and encourage them to dispose of litter properly
- Recycle your household items - ask your Local Government what you can recycle in your area
- Get involved in 'Clean Up Australia Day'
- Report sick, injured, stranded or dead marine animals like seabirds, dugong, turtles, whales or dolphins to the Environmental Protection Agency Hotline on **1300 130 372 (24hr)**.

For Further Information

Visit the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority's website:
www.gbrmpa.gov.au

Visit or write to us:
2-68 Flinders Street
PO Box 1379 Townsville Qld 4810
AUSTRALIA

Send an email: info@gbrmpa.gov.au

Call or send us a fax:
Phone (07) 4750 0700
Fax (07) 4772 6093

Web links:

The Australian Maritime Safety Authority website:
www.amsa.gov.au

The International Maritime Organisation website:
www.imo.org/home.asp

The Queensland Environmental Protection Agency website:
www.epa.qld.gov.au/environmental_management/coast_and_oceans/coastal_management/beach_and_ocean_litter/

Clean Up Australia Day website: www.cleanup.com.au