

Stop trashing our oceans

Stepping off the plane near midnight on Midway Island amid the Pacific Ocean, the night sky dazzles with millions of stars. Thousands of Bonin petrels soar and dart. Astride bikes, we weave past Laysan albatross chicks posted like fluffy brown sentries every few feet along a path to the old army barracks where we will stay.

June brings us Oceans Month across the nation, a time to galvanize action to better know and protect coasts, islands and oceans with the rich, diverse wildlife and resources they support.

Midway Island National Wildlife Refuge lies amid the 140,000 square miles of the Papahānaumokuākea National Marine Monument, established by President Bush in April 2006. Compared with the Florida coast and nearby keys, the Monument islands are, comparatively, untouched by human action.

But all is not well at Midway or at other islands dotting the planet. And all is not well with the world's oceans.

Even at these remote Pacific Ocean islands, noxious weeds on shore and piles of trash disturb island and coral reef ecosystems. At Midway, since the early 1900s, some 249 plant species have been introduced that destroyed more than 1,100 acres of seabird nesting habitat. And human action over the past two centuries has left lead contamination. The lead, ingested by sea birds as they pick up materials from the ground, causes "droop wing," a condition that often kills them.

Each of this planet's oceans, coasts and islands has its own story. But one common theme recurs -- marine debris. It is everyone's problem. As cartoon character Pogo once quipped, **"We have met the enemy, and it is us."**

At Biscayne National Park, park personnel, working with volunteers who provide 2,600 hours of service, pick up some 22 tons of marine debris off the islands each year. Across the globe, more, much more, circulates in ocean waters, gyrating as a mass of flotsam and jetsam amid ocean currents.

What is this trash? At Midway, we walked the beaches of fine, white sand -- enraptured by the aquamarine waters and discouraged by the junk dotting the beach. Tires, toothbrushes and toys; bottles and bottle caps; filament and other fishing gear; lighters and lingerie; shoes, shirts and shrink wrap. You name it, we found it.

Some of this stuff comes from nearby boats. But some comes thousands of miles from the mainlands in China and the United States. A writing pen or soda bottle carelessly dropped curbside finds its way to storm drains, creeks, rivers and on to the ocean.

At Biscayne National Park, we find ropes and lines from ships, buckets, barrels, lobster traps, wood from broken boats, shoes, rubber boots, even toothbrushes. Much of it comes from commercial ships and fishing boats -- some comes from shore.

The trash is unsightly. It can also be lethal for turtles and birds.

The trash is unsightly. It can also be lethal. On Midway Islands, seafaring albatross searching for squid scoop up trash and, unknowingly, feed an olio of garbage to their young. Too much of this ingested junk fills the stomachs of chicks so that, eventually, they starve. **One estimate puts the annual amount of junk picked up by adult albatrosses foraging the ocean at more than 8,000 pounds of small plastics annually.**



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At Biscayne National Park, derelict fishing gear drapes across long portions of prime turtle nesting beaches and, if not removed, prevents turtles from nesting in good habitat. Birds, too, become entangled in thin fishing line.

Elsewhere around the globe, marine debris strangles young seals, ensnares turtles, and, as on Midway, is ingested by birds. Reversing this problem must be the work of citizens everywhere. The Interior Department, as this nation's leading conservation agency, is helping to galvanize action with partners.

Through a Marine Debris Initiative with the Commerce Department, we are partnering with nonprofit organizations and the private sector to better understand the origins of all this trash so that we can better target our efforts to prevent its endless accumulation.

Through partnerships around the nation, we are campaigning to remind America to put trash where it belongs -- in trash cans and at appropriate disposal sites. We are working with fishing professionals to "leave no trace." In Hawaii and, now, in the Northeast, we are turning trash into treasure, supplying fishing debris to waste-to-energy projects.

Oceans Month is a time to appeal to a nation to make a difference in simple ways. We wouldn't throw trash in our front yards. Why toss it into streets, leave it on beaches or drop it into rivers and oceans?

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