

Common Beach Litter

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Litter along Lake Ontario. Photo by Elizabeth Wolff

Sources of Great Lakes beach litter?

While walking along the shoreline of eastern Lake Ontario you are likely to notice its beauty, but you may stumble across natural debris and man-made **litter** or trash as well. Natural debris benefits the area by promoting dune stability and providing nutrients, food, and habitat in an otherwise dry, sparse environment. However, man-made litter adversely affects the area. Examples of common beach litter are pressure treated lumber, balloons, tires, shoes, balls, monofilament fishing line, plastic bottles, and aluminum cans. Although man-made litter is often washed on the eastern shoreline by Lake Ontario's currents, trash is also left behind by visitors of the Eastern Lake Ontario Dunes and Wetlands Area (ELODWA). Properties providing public access have adopted a "**Carry-in, Carry-out**" policy encouraging recreational users to take out all the items they brought to the properties, including trash.

Negative impacts of beach litter

Some of the beaches, hiking trails, waterways, and other recreational hotspots of ELODWA are exposed to high recreational use. When recreational users don't carry-out what they carry-in, litter can accumulate. During the 2008 Alliance for the Great Lakes Adopt-a-Beach™ clean-up, 30,053 pounds of trash was removed from Great Lakes beaches across Illinois, Indiana, Michigan, Ohio, and Wisconsin. The most common items collected were cigarette filters, food wrappers, containers, caps, and lids. The composition of litter items can lead to potential problems in Great Lakes ecosystems because plastics take a long time to **degrade**, or break down, and because they are dangerous to wildlife. Some animals misidentify plastics for food, get tangled in or cut by the plastic. Great Lakes fishery biologists have even found plastic pieces in the stomachs of some fish. These harmful interactions can lead to infections, blocked digestive tracts, or even introduction of toxic byproducts into the animal's system.



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Beach cleanup along Lake Ontario. Photo by Greg Chapman

Degradation of beach litter

The amount of time it takes for litter materials to degrade continues to be the source of ongoing debates. For example, cigarette filters are said to take about five years to break down in Great Lakes, but because they are made of plastic some believe it may take hundreds of years for complete degradation. Newer “biodegradable” plastics like those in some shopping bags are being marketed. However, these require microbes for decomposition. Microbes may not always be present. Some other factors that can influence degradation times are material type, size, and thickness, temperature and exposure to sunlight.

How can you help minimize beach litter?

Be an informal steward by following the suggestions below:

1. Practice “Carry-in, Carry-out” at properties providing public access
2. Bring an empty bag and pick up litter others have left behind
3. Read your local newspapers to learn about upcoming beach cleanups, interpretive hikes, or other stewardship opportunities that you can get involved in
4. Reduce the amount of litter you generate and buy goods made from recycled materials

References

Alliance for the Great Lakes. Adopt-a-Beach™ Newsletter 2009. page 1. <http://www.greatlakes.org/Document.Doc?id=535>.

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