

The Beach Doctor Is In 2

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I started to clean the beach back in the 1980s, motivated by my awareness of a startling increase in the amount of garbage that was ending up in Santa Barbara's waterways, streets, and beaches. I wanted to return the beaches to something more natural and pristine, and started by cleaning the ones I frequented most often: Butterfly and Hammond's. I didn't (and still don't) believe in removing the natural elements of the beach (things like seaweed, sticks, shells, rocks, and driftwood) because these items are food and shelter for all the critters in the entire ecosystem. But plastic garbage is a different story, and it was everywhere. It had to go.

Another inspiration came later, during my surf travels. My experiences showed me how less affluent countries dealt with their garbage due to lack of education and funding on the issue. It was shocking to see the garbage; piles of it on land, streams filled with it, and air polluted from its incineration. I was determined to do something, anything, to try to counteract this both locally and globally.

The purpose of this letter is to begin to educate people about what's at stake in thinking about garbage, and to call to action the investors and packaging manufacturers whose decisions have a crucial effect on the waste we generate. The plastic garbage comes in various sizes, ranging from bottles and bags we can see, down to plankton-sized molecules that are invisible to the naked eye but poisonous to marine and terrestrial life. This kind of waste has its source in too many of our materials and packaging, and it's more important than ever for product packaging to offer presentable and profitable alternatives and help eliminate toxic byproducts.

Over Time, these basic questions keep coming to mind:

Why is our packaging so big? How can we eliminate our need to transport or store our garbage? Why don't we use more materials that break down rapidly without causing further pollution to the ocean and groundwater? How can we act more responsibly worldwide and take viable steps to reduce or eliminate plastic packaging? Why don't more product packaging manufacturers make an investment toward packaging that is both effective and health-conscious?

All water flows to the ocean, carrying with it any detritus it may have accumulated along the way. Through the action of ocean currents, this detritus is either deposited on the beach or it joins the gyres – circulating ocean currents near the center of ocean basins. There are many people who, like me, care enough to maintain the beauty of our favorite areas of recreation, the places we go to escape the stresses of life. By our actions, not only is the garbage gone from our view, but thousands of pieces of

plastic were responsibly removed from the beach. I feel pride in knowing that the plastic I have collected will never join the circulating garbage patches in the planet's ocean basins.

But then what? Cleaning up our act is only the first step. The most important issue facing us and the ecosystem is the garbage we can't see. The trash in front of you can be cleaned up, put into a can out of sight, but change also needs to happen on a municipal scale. We need to take further steps to ensure that microscopic plastics don't continue to make their poisonous way into the groundwater and soil, into the oceans, eventually into our food supply.

Alternative packaging methods using plant-based materials are one part of the solution to many of these issues – this kind of packaging would rapidly decompose, will not change the water quality, and could even be composted into soil at home. If more of us insisted upon this, it would stage nothing short of revolution: it could eliminate landfills and floating debris, because it will be able to be solubilized by water, broken down by soil, and deteriorate from the sun's rays. This kind of packaging can coexist with our environment without causing a pH imbalance.

We, the consumers, do have choices in this matter: we can choose to put pressure on the makers of our goods to use more responsible packaging materials. Many companies are already working toward producing products with non-toxic biodegradable packaging – we can choose to use more of these products than others. We can act locally by speaking up when we see people acting irresponsibly on our beaches and trails, and we can act globally by changing a system through our insistence on better production practices.

Tim Kirshner

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(Mr. Kirshner grew up in Montecito, and in the 1980s formed "Beach Doctor," a small beach cleaning service. Years ago, Montecito Journal named Tim "The Man who Hates Trash." Tim says that volunteer help is currently needed at Hammond's Beach in Montecito, to separate hundreds of thousands of pieces of Styrofoam and plastic from a line of sticks and seaweed that actually belong on the beach. Tim is arranging short meet-ups until the plastic bits are gone. You can e-mail beachdoctor2001@hotmail.com for more information.)