

## Water Pollution

By Zayne Isgett, Lakewood Elementary School

Imagine you are having a birthday party outside in your yard. You have fun all day long until the party is over. When the guests leave you take a look around and realize that having a party leaves quite a mess to clean up. Scattered around the picnic tables are empty cardboard pizza boxes, plastic spoons, soda cans, dirty paper plates, and napkins. You begin to get the dreaded task over with and start picking up garbage, when suddenly the wind blows some of it up and away. You might think there is no harm done, but where does that trash end up? That might be a thought you need to take more seriously. Many of our rivers in the United States have become filled with litter. How does litter occur in rivers? How does that litter affect the natural resources in and around rivers? And finally does that litter in rivers eventually impact our oceans? These are important questions that need to be answered.

First let us begin by learning how litter occurs in rivers. Some litter ends up in rivers accidentally like the birthday party example. Other times litter enters rivers by people being irresponsible. It is shocking to learn, but a true fact, that people will purposely take and dump their garbage into rivers as an easy way to dispose of their waste. Next litter might come from a distant location and travel to the rivers. In cities, for example, many smokers throw their cigarette butts on the ground. Therefore when it rains, that litter gets washed into the drainage system. In turn, the drainage system flows directly into the nearby rivers. People having innocent fun by a river may also result in accidental littering. Take balloons for example. Kids love to play with balloons and watch them get carried by the wind way up into the sky. Those balloons will soon deflate and fall back down to earth and may land in rivers. As a result, animals might mistake it for food, consume it, and choke to death. Another example is you could be with your family on a sunny afternoon trying to catch some fish in the nearby river when your fishing line gets caught and you have to cut it. The line will sink and remain in the river for an innocent animal

to get caught up in and die. So whether done on accident or on purpose, litter ends up in rivers and problems will soon follow.

Now that we know how litter gets into rivers, let us learn how it affects the natural resources in and around rivers. Take another look back at the litter that blew away from the birthday party: cardboard boxes, soda cans, and those plastic spoons. It is interesting to learn how long it takes for those particular items to degrade once they end up in the river water. Cardboard boxes take 2 weeks to degrade, the aluminum soda cans would take 200 years, and worst of all the plastic spoons take an unbelievable 400 years to break down ([www.water-pollution.org](http://www.water-pollution.org)). While that litter remains in our rivers it creates problems for many of our natural resources. The soil around rivers may become contaminated from the litter as it decomposes and unhealthy plants will grow as a result of absorbing the bad nutrients in the soil. Then the animals and humans that eat those plants could be harmed. Another way animals can be hurt by litter in rivers is from the balloons. Animals mistake the balloons for their prey, eat them, and then die from doing so. The fishing line that broke off into the water can entangle animals causing them to die of starvation or suffocation. The litter that ends up in our rivers truly has drastic affects on our natural resources.

The final question that we need answered is does litter in rivers eventually impact the oceans? Rivers flow and empty out into the oceans every day. The litter that is remaining in the rivers will flow right along with the water and into the seas. Once litter ends up in our oceans, it is more difficult to clean up because it can go miles and miles away from human contact. Litter in our oceans will then have a widespread affect on marine and plant life. One example is if a plastic bag lands on some marine plants, they won't be able to get sunlight and eventually die. That same plastic bag could affect the sea turtles as well. The sea turtles could mistake the bag for food, eat it, and get choked. Problems like this

may be out of human view for a while, but in time, we will see how that litter that started in rivers ended up impacting our oceans as well.

Wow! Who would have thought a birthday party could cause such a disastrous result? Litter from many sources finds its way into our rivers and creates problems with our natural resources. If litter is not cleaned up and removed from the rivers, then that litter can lead to the oceans and become a greater issue in the future. It's time for littering to stop and to protect our natural resources.