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The Disappointing Catch: Pollution and How We Can Fight It

Never do two more different worlds collide than when a boy, his father, and their boat meet the coastal waters for a long day of fishing, fun, and what my mom calls “gentlemen’s talk.” On one of those sunny, hot, Carolina days out on our boat, I cast my reel and got a bite. This was not just any bite. I could tell this one was going to be a big one, the kind you do not have to exaggerate to your friends when you get home. As I reeled in my catch, I was sure I was about to become a legend at the docks. On the end of my line was a giant, black garbage bag filled with trash. I looked at my dad, first disappointed and then shocked, not understanding how this could be. I had so many questions. Why are our rivers and oceans polluted, and are humans causing it? What effect does pollution of our rivers and ocean have on the plants, animals, and soil around our waters? And most importantly, what can we do to conserve our natural resources and reduce pollution? What I learned that day is important enough that everyone else should know it too. The answers to all of these questions go back to the river.

The first place to begin is our rivers. So, how does litter and pollution occur in our rivers? Sadly, humans cause much of the pollution of our rivers, either by accident or on purpose. Humans can accidentally pollute our rivers by not acting responsibly when they are on the water or in areas near the water. One example of this is fishermen who do not make sure their trash is in a safe place on their boat (to be sure it does not fly out into the river). Another example is families enjoying an afternoon on the shoreline and not putting their garbage in a trashcan (so it does not blow away into the nearby water). Rivers are also polluted sometimes

accidentally by sewage overflow and storm water run-off. The Environmental Protection Agency reports that human activities on land cause about 80% of the litter and pollutants found in our waters and on our shorelines. (<https://www.scdhec.gov>). Not all pollutants and litter found in our rivers are there by accident. Even though most areas have designated places for the public to use to dispose of their garbage, many people throw trash and other waste into our waters as an easy and fast way to get rid of it. No matter whether people litter or pollute our waters by accident or on purpose, the result is the same. Litter and pollutants end up in our rivers, and plants, animals, water and even the soil pay the price.

How big of a price do the animals, plants, water and soil pay for the litter and pollutants found in our rivers? The answer may take many, many years to answer. What we do know is that water is necessary for plants, animals, and people to live. Humans need clean drinking water, and farmers need water to take care of their crops. Plants and animals cannot survive when litter and pollutants make their water sources dangerous. Animals are often killed by plastics and other litter found in our waters, either by being trapped or by mistaking the litter for food. Litter does not just kill marine animals. Birds are also at risk because they use the dangerous litter to make their nests. When an animal tries to eat or use the litter, they often die slowly from suffocation or starvation because their bodies are not able to digest the material. (Environmental Protection Agency: *Marine Litter — Trash That Kills*, <https://www.epa.gov>). Even the plants and soil around our rivers and oceans suffer when pollutants and litter are released into our waters. When the soil around our waters becomes contaminated with pollutants buried or spilled on the soil, the plants growing there take in the dangerous substances through their root systems. When this happens, the plants may die, or worse, humans or animals could become sick by eating the contaminated plants. Also, people and animals can breathe in the

dangerous pollutants through dust in the air or absorb the chemicals through their skin. (A.L. Kennedy, *The Effects of Soil Pollution on Humans*, March 12, 2014, <https://www.livestrong.com>; Environmental Protection Agency: *Soil Contamination*, <https://www.epa.gov>).

It is clear how pollutants and litter get into our rivers and how they affect the animals, plants, water and soil. But how do litter and pollutants in our rivers make it to and affect our oceans? “Eventually, all things merge into one, and a river runs through it.” (Norman Maclean, *A River Runs Through It and Other Stories*). Even though it seems simple, the way litter and pollutants make it from our rivers to our oceans is not always the same. Rivers flow and empty into oceans, and any trash or pollutants in the rivers will eventually end up in our oceans. However, wind and even boats can carry litter from our rivers to the oceans too. After litter and pollutants make it to the ocean, it is much harder to clean up because it travels further from humans. Animals and plants in the ocean have the same problems with litter and pollutants that animals and plants in the rivers have. The type of animals and plants may be different in the oceans and rivers, but the dangers are the same; only in the ocean, it is harder for humans to see and try to fix immediately.

Even though humans are responsible for many of the pollutants and litter in our rivers and oceans, the good news is that humans can also help to prevent water pollution and to conserve our natural resources. It does not take much for humans to help prevent pollution in our waters. For example, using proper trash receptacles on land and while on boats and taking garbage to dump sites instead of throwing waste into our waters would greatly reduce the amount of litter in our waters. Also, humans can help prevent pollution by using environmentally-safe household products and trying to avoid cleaners, toiletries, and pesticides that contain dangerous

chemicals. A great way to prevent run-off is to plant a garden with many plants, and home-grown vegetables and herbs taste even better than the ones you buy at a store. If possible, people should avoid using plastic bags; choose paper bags or bring your own reusable bag when shopping. Sometimes it is impossible to avoid plastics, but an easy way to prevent plastics from causing harm to animals is to recycle the plastic instead of placing it into the trash. Finally, to conserve water, take showers instead of baths, always turn off the water while you are brushing your teeth, and wash clothes and dishes only when you have full loads. These simple efforts can reduce the amount of pollutants and litter in our waters and conserve our natural resources.

It is amazing what a boy can learn on a boat trip with his dad, and how much a “gentlemen’s talk” can change the way you look at the world. That hot, sunny day out on the boat, I did not become a legend at the docks with the biggest catch of the summer. But more importantly, I did learn a valuable lesson that may help to preserve our rivers, oceans and marine animals so that one day, my children, grandchildren or I may actually be able to make that legendary catch.