

'Quest for trash' proves to be a valuable experience

A group of friends embarked on a trip to the coast for the Great Oregon Beach Cleanup

By Amalie Young
Higher Education Reporter

We sang old show tunes and talked about recycling as we sped away from Eugene and the thick gray clouds that hung over the city early Saturday morning.

Headed west toward the ocean, we hoped we'd find sunnier skies.

I had persuaded a handful of friends — none of us avid environmentalists — that it was time we did something worthwhile with our weekend.

I've been told that Oregon is an environmentalists' haven, and I've

known it's long past my turn to pitch in to make sure it stays that way.

The Great Oregon Beach Cleanup, a semi-annual event, takes place along the length of the coast. Last spring, 5,500 volunteer beachcombers picked up more than 28 tons of trash.

Trash bags in hand, we slid through the sand, poked under



pieces of driftwood scattered above the tide and looked for debris.

Our quest for trash wasn't easy at first — the wind spreads the sand quickly, burying what is on

the surface. But as our eyes became accustomed to the landscape, we found more debris. We started to dig around a protruding corner of plastic and uncovered a huge web of old, shredded bags.

We collected tiny broken pieces of colored plastic and filled our bags with blue, purple and green fragments of old lids, bottles and caps, orange and yellow rope and squares of Styrofoam.

Some school children, on an extra-credit field trip with their science teacher, found two tires with rusted rims and rolled them down the beach back to the collection site.

Perched on the sun-soaked sand dunes of the North Jetty near Florence, we sighed happily as we looked toward the layer of clouds tucked on the other side of the coastal range.

Nicole Nietling, a biology student at the University, examined a black brick she had found.

"It's probably tar," she said as she chipped away at it.

We were warned not to touch any medical supplies — needles, syringes and bandages — or chemical containers.

In the shadow of a piece of driftwood, we found a long, narrow tube that looked like it had once been part of an intravenous feeding contraption. The needle was missing from the end. We did as we'd been told and propped up a piece of driftwood to mark the spot, and we reported it to the beach captain.

After two and a half hours of wandering through the dunes, our trash bags were only half full. We lugged them back to the drop-off spot near the jetty.

Jeff Farm, area manager for Oregon State Parks, and his son Casey, 14, said they drive along the coast near Florence every year collecting the trash bags. They take the trash to a Lane County recycling facility, where it is weighed and sorted.

They make a game of guessing what it will weigh.

"I'd say about 0.36 tons," Farm said. His son bets higher: "I'll go



AMANDA COWAN/Emerald

Matt Wildman is one of the many volunteers who picked up garbage along the Oregon Coast on Saturday afternoon.

for about 0.38."

Over the years, beachcombers have found some unusual things, Farm said. Once they had to haul a refrigerator off the beach.

When items that can be identified to a specific boat are found, Farm makes a report to the Coast Guard.

But most of the trash is dumped by beachgoers or is washed ashore — there isn't much that can be

identified as belonging to someone.

Out of sight, out of mind. Isn't that what they always say?

Before I had gotten the words out, "I never litter," I saw myself walking down 13th Avenue just a few days ago, hot coffee in hand. Then, carried by a breeze, the napkin I held in my other hand slipped out and drifted away — and I let it go.

Never again, I promised myself.



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