

Plastic Jellyfish

Clean, pure water may be our most precious resource. The U.S. Congress has proclaimed 2002 as "The Year of Clean Water" commemorating the 30th anniversary of the Clean Water Act with the theme "Clean Water...It's Up To You!" Much of the pollution that impacts the quality of water is thoughtless discarded trash. People who dispose of their trash along waterways not only create an ugly mess but can also harm wildlife.

Plastics are particularly hazardous. Although plastic products make our lives easier and safer, two characteristics make them a threat to wildlife. They are lightweight, easily scattered by the wind and transported by water. Secondly, because they are indestructible they stay in the environment forever. Many fish, birds and other animals die every year from entanglement in plastic six-pack rings that come from canned drinks. Nylon fishing line discarded by anglers can also entangle and kill wildlife. Animals can mistake some plastics for food, sea turtles have mistaken plastic bags for jellyfish (their favorite food) and choked to death trying to eat the bag.

Gain an awareness of the potential problem with plastic pollution, with a family activity using the Project WILD Aquatic activity *Plastic Jellyfish*. The instructions are simple and the result might surprise you.

1. Collect every piece of plastic waste used in your home for three days or until you have a variety of samples. Notice how much plastic you use daily. Safely rinse out the containers and dispose of any leftover harmful contents.
2. Sort the materials into two main groups.
 - a) items you think could be harmful to wildlife if discarded improperly into the environment.
 - b) items that probably wouldn't be harmful to wildlife.
3. Now sort the potentially harmful items into three smaller groups. (Some items will fit into more than one group).
 - a) Create a group for items in which animals may become entangled.
 - b) A second group for materials that might be mistakenly eaten by animals as food.
 - c) The third group for items that might cut an animal that steps on it or attempts to eat it.

Classify the sorted items by using the following codes:

E = entanglement hazard, **F** = mistaken as food, **C** = cutting hazard

Examples: six-pack holders - E; plastic bags - F&E; Strapping/packaging bands - E&C; Plastic utensils, cups, Styrofoam coolers - F&C; fishing line - E&C; plastic containers - E&C; balloons - F; fishing nets - E&C

4. Have a family discussion about actions that can lessen the potential hazard of plastic (and other waste materials) to wildlife.
 - Develop a family "action plan" to- Recycle, Reduce and Reuse! Always dispose of trash properly.
 - Carry a litter bag so if you see trash you can pick it up to dispose of it properly
 - If you see a friend littering, explain why they may be doing more harm than they realize.
 - Cut up six-pack plastic rings and tangles of fishing line into short sections before discarding in the trash or recycling.

Your extra little effort will keep the water clean and may also save a fish, bird or other animal.