

In The News: Trashing the Littoral

by Peter B. Fleischer

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Few New Yorkers are aware that the waterfront begins at their doorstep. In fact, the quality of City beaches and water is related to consumption and use of water at home. City streets connect to the waterways through catch basin, storm drain and combined sewer systems. A cigarette butt casually tossed to the ground in Manhattan can wind up in a wildlife refuge in Brooklyn or on a Staten Island or Queens beach. Motor oil dumped in a catch basin in the Bronx can find its way to Manhattan shores. Everyday actions of New Yorkers, many of whom rarely think of the City's waters, affect City shores dramatically.

According to Andrew Willner, of the New York/New Jersey Baykeeper, "industrial and institutional polluters were the biggest threat to the waterways." "Now," he stresses, "'non-point sources' are the most significant water discharge issue we face." Non-point sources include easily disposed items such as paper trash, oil products, plastics, dog feces (scooped and then dropped down a catch basin) and cigarette butts.

On a visit to the marshes of Bayside's Little Neck Bay, cigarettes float in abundance alongside fluttering plastic bags and bottles bobbing on the tide. The marsh is urban habitat for turtles, bullfrogs, red fox, geese, swans and striped bass. "Over 320 species of birds live in or migrate through the area" says Lora Harris of the nearby Alley Pond Environmental Center. The floating pollution migrates from the Long Island Sound and from catch basins in Northern Queens. These 'floatables' become caught in the wetlands' high marsh grasses. Though jostled by the tides, the trash accumulates becoming a threat to wildlife as well as an eyesore.

The Bronx River, the City's only true fresh water stream, is afflicted with extraordinary accumulations of trash that detract from the considerable natural beauty of that scenic, canopied watercourse. In water that ducks, herons and muskrat call home, Snapple bottles, Dunkin Donuts Styrofoam and Burger King paper form a trash flotilla.

Not content to let their nascent canoe route be befouled, fifty civic groups and government agencies including the Department of Parks, Partnership for Parks, Bronx River Restoration and The Point Community Development Corporation have organized clean-up efforts and river festivals. Presently, they are attempting to create boat launches at key river sites. Urban Park Rangers offer canoe lessons and tours (800-201-PARKS) focused on water safety.

Such efforts publicize the improbable amenity that is the Bronx River. These actions create

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access for nature lovers and for recreation. Trash ranging from junk food wrappers to junked cars is being removed. Jenny Hoffner, coordinator of the Bronx River Working Group, described the work. "Last year, we removed eighty tons of debris and twenty-seven cars. Twenty-two blockages were also removed." Eleven community groups have now adopted stretches of the river ensuring ongoing stewardship. According to Ms. Hoffner, "Partnering has been phenomenal. The Parks Department has been instrumental."

In Jamaica Bay, residents also face a complex challenge though in a much larger ecosystem. The issues include beach cleanliness, bay water quality, commercial and recreational fishing, wastewater flows, wildlife protection and dune erosion. Recently, on a Jamaica Bay list serve, residents and organizations prepared for beach clean-ups, trash awareness campaigns with elected officials and public education about the link between storm drains and the shores. An educational conference on litter has also been proposed. According to Shino Tanikawa of the NYC Soil and Water Conservation District, a clean up of the bay's many abandoned boats will kick-off on June 10th.

Some list serve participants have suggested a renewal of abandoned efforts to stencil catch basins throughout the city as part of a floatables educational campaign. Stenciling drains, under permits granted by the Department of Environmental Protection, alerts passers-by to the connection between the street and the sea. Stenciling also aims to deter dumping of motor oil and restaurant grease by would-be polluters.

Peter Sounds Off:

There used to be a bumper sticker that read "if you think education is expensive, try ignorance." The average New Yorker lacks awareness of the waterways that surround the City and his or her role in protecting them. In this highly urban environment, it is easy to forget that New York is encompassed by a natural world. The water itself is an amenity offering open space, recreation, and alongside its industrial and infrastructural roles. City shores offer wildlife refuges, beaches, parks, and marinas serving a multitude of urban purposes.

Managing the City's shores and waterways for multiple use must be the goal of the responsible city, state and federal agencies. In particular, City Parks, DEP, the NYS Department of Conservation (the agency with enforcement power) and the National Park Service should expand efforts to make the public aware of ITS role in protecting these valuable water and shore resources. Prevention is far less expensive than remediation.

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Peter B. Fleischer, currently writing a book on the New York City waterfront, was formerly a transportation and environment policy advisor to New York City Mayors David Dinkins and Rudy Giuliani.