

Coastal Cleanups With Kids

July Lewis

It may seem unlikely for parents struggling to get their children to even clean their room, but there are few projects that can engage a child in his or her environment like a beach cleanup. Every year hundreds of students, from grade school to college, get excited about the International Coastal Cleanup in Rhode Island. It is the perfect service opportunity for a group of kids because it is physical, outdoors, any child can do it and it teaches very basic and important lessons about the world around us.

The International Coastal Cleanup is the world's largest volunteer effort to help protect our oceans, lakes and rivers. Since the Cleanup began, over 7.8 million volunteers worldwide have removed over 135 million pounds of trash from shores across the planet. The Ocean Conservancy uses the data collected on the cleanup to produce an annual country-by-country, state-by-state index of the problem of marine debris. Audubon Society of Rhode Island has led the International Coastal Cleanup in Rhode Island since 1985, with about 2000 volunteers participating annually—including many school children.

Teachers find that participating in the cleanup is an opportunity to get their students outside and moving around. "They think it's fun," says Jennifer Klein, Audubon's Urban Education Coordinator, who led a cleanup with students at Roger Williams Middle School. "They turn it into a competition of who can collect the most trash." Megan Cresci, a high school teacher at The Met School in Providence, led a series of cleanups this year with her class at different locations around the state: Bold Point in East Providence, Ferry Beach in Narragansett, Fort Adams in Newport and Jacob's Point in Bristol. Although the students were a little uncomfortable with the unfamiliar environments at first, by the final cleanup they took off like a shot as soon as they hit the beach. "I can't believe these are my students," said Ms. Cresci, trying to keep them together. "Usually I can't get them to move!" By exploring and physically interacting with the environment, they learn in a different way than they would by just studying it. With every piece of litter they pick up, they learn that trash doesn't just disappear once it's out of our hands—it stays in the environment until someone does something about it. They understand the connection between human behavior and the environment around us.

Once students see the problem of trash littering our shores, they are quick to think of ways to correct

Question: What's the perfect project to get a kid energized about taking care of the environment?

Answer: Cleaning up trash!

the problem. The first thing that generally comes to mind is to put a trash can at every site. Teachers then urge them to ask the next question—who will take care of the trash can? Whose responsibility is it? Who pays? Can you have a trash can at every single beach? If not, how can you get people to take responsibility for the trash that

they generate and not throw it on the ground?

Finally, standing back and looking at a clean beach with the waves lapping the shore, the most important lesson that students learn by doing a cleanup is that they can make a difference—one piece of trash at a time.

July Lewis is the volunteer coordinator for the Audubon Society of Rhode Island.



Mannie Babbitt, Dayla Olivio and Nate Rodriguez enjoy cataloging the trash they pick up. Photo: April Alix.

International Coastal Cleanup

The Ocean Conservancy's annual international coastal cleanup has been held each September for the past 25 years. Audubon Society of Rhode Island has led the Rhode Island cleanup since it started. In Massachusetts, the COASTSWEEP cleanup is coordinated by the University of Massachusetts Boston's Urban Harbors Institute.

Each September, hundreds of thousands of volunteers from countries all over the world spend a day picking up everything from cigarette butts and food wrappers to lost fishing nets and major appliances. Because trash travels to the ocean by way of storm drains and waterways, they don't just work along ocean beaches; these dedicated folks slog through mud and sand along lakes, streams, and rivers, too, often working far inland. Some volunteers walk the shoreline, others collect trash from boats while others put on their scuba gear to collect trash below the water's surface. People of all ages, from any walk of life, can participate. Friends, families, neighbors, club members, grade school classes—all kinds of people turn out on one day to work together in spirit across many time zones.

The International Coastal Clean Up began with one woman walking along the beach of South Padre Island, Texas. Appalled at the amount of trash she saw, Linda Maraniss immediately felt compelled to do something about it. As a former employee of Ocean Conservancy (then known as the Center for Environmental Education), she knew something about solutions. Teaming up with like-minded people, she organized a beach cleanup. In a mere two hours, 2,800 Texans picked up 124 tons of trash along 122 miles of coastline. Since 1986, that effort has rippled out across the globe, and over a quarter century has grown into a much-loved and much valued experience that nearly half-a-million people look forward to each fall—with more joining each year.



Ava Vasquez checks off the trash she picked up on East Matunuck Beach on her clipboard. *Photo: Heidi Vazquez.*



Coordinators show students what to look out for and how to fill in the checklists. *Photo: April Alix.*



Miguel Vazquez rolls an old tire down the beach to the dump truck site. *Photo: Heidi Vazquez.*