

Week of 10/25/09

Dear EarthTalk: Has anyone ever studied the environmental impact of discarded cigarettes? I'm constantly appalled at the number of drivers I see pitching their butts out their car windows.

-- Ned Jordan, via email



It's true that littered cigarette butts are a public nuisance, and not just for aesthetic reasons. The filters on cigarettes—four fifths of all cigarettes have them—are made of cellulose acetate, a form of plastic that is very slow to degrade in the environment. A typical cigarette butt can take anywhere from 18 months to 10 years to decompose, depending on environmental conditions.

But beyond the plastic, these filters—which are on cigarettes in the first place to absorb contaminants to prevent them from going into the lungs—contain trace amounts of toxins like cadmium, arsenic and lead. Thus when smokers discard their butts improperly—out the car window or off the end of a pier or onto the sidewalk below—they are essentially tossing these substances willy-nilly into the environment.

Studies done by Johns Hopkins University, the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and even the tobacco industry itself show that these contaminants can get into soils and waterways, harm or kill living organisms and generally degrade surrounding ecosystems.

While individual discarded cigarette butts may be small, they add up to a huge problem. Some 5.5 trillion cigarettes are consumed worldwide each year. The non-profit Keep America Beautiful reports that cigarette butts constitute as much as one-third of all litter nationwide when measured by the number of discarded items, not volume. According to the Ocean Conservancy, a non-profit that advocates for stronger protection of marine ecosystems, cigarette butts are the most commonly littered item found on America's salt and fresh water beaches according to feedback received by hundreds of thousands of volunteers taking part in the group's annual Coastal Clean-up event.

While the tobacco industry may have its hands full just trying to stay afloat in the maelstrom of ongoing bad publicity, critics say it should be doing more to prevent cigarette butt litter. "Just as beverage manufacturers contribute to anti-litter campaigns, and have invested in public education on litter issues, so too should the tobacco industry," says Kathleen Register, founder and executive director of Clean Virginia Waterways, a non-profit that has spearheaded the fight against cigarette butt litter in the mid-Atlantic region of the U.S. She adds that cigarette manufacturers "need to take an active and responsible role in educating smokers about this issue and devote resources to the cleanup of cigarette litter."

Register suggests a number of strategies including putting anti-litter messages on all cigarette packaging and advertisements, distributing small, free portable ashtrays, and placing and maintaining outdoor ashtrays in areas where smokers congregate. She also suggests putting an extra tax on cigarette sales, with proceeds going toward anti-litter education efforts and to defray the costs of cleaning up butts. "Picking up littered cigarette butts costs schools, businesses and park agencies money," she says. "By taxing smokers for anti-litter educational efforts, some of the costs of cleaning up cigarette butts will shift onto smokers." One way or another, Register hopes, smokers will learn that the Earth is not one giant ashtray.

CONTACTS: [CDC](#); [Clean Virginia Waterways](#).



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