

Terrible Trash

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On April 11th, many park groups, scout troops, and caring individuals partook in the first Braddock District-wide watershed cleanup. Contents pulled at various localities included bottles, cans, all sorts of plastic objects, cigarette butts, drug paraphernalia, pressure-treated lumber, broken toys, car parts, and a slew of other objects. Some of the more curious items discovered by teams of Girl Scouts and industrious neighbors included a desk, a screen door, a bag of concrete, an arm chair and an oxygen tank! Collectively, the local volunteers filled and hauled 20 bags of trash plus four additional bags of recyclable materials out of the park along the entire length of the Long Branch Stream Valley. Some of the odder items recovered included a lawn chair, three tires, and even a swing set!

Left in the parks over time, this unsightly garbage harms the environment and all living creatures around it. For example, small animals can climb into bottles, cannot get out, and die a slow death—these finds are both sad and totally gross. More often, containers trap water forming breeding pools for mosquitoes including the aggressive, non-native Asian tiger mosquito (*Aedes albopictus*). Glass shatters into sharp shards before grinding down to sand; metal rusts into jagged edges prior to corroding into dust. Some plastics break down into tinier pieces but not into constituent molecules or atoms—it still remains the same plastic chemical only smaller. Like other pollutants carried by water (e.g., oil leaks, lawn chemical runoff, dissolving pet waste), minute bits of plastic contaminate wide patches, from local plots to the oceans.

Looking at the waterway connections, the Long Branch Stream merges in to Accotink Creek, briefly widens into Lake Accotink, becomes Accotink Creek again, then flows into Accotink Bay, Gunston Cove, the Potomac River, the Chesapeake Bay, and the Atlantic Ocean. Once in the Atlantic, plastic flotsam from many sources congregates into an area the size of Texas, known as a North Atlantic Trash Gyre or Vortex, where it harms marine life and sea birds. Sea animals cannot always tell the difference between nutritious food and small bits of trash that can kill them, which, in turn, may also affect the foods we eat!

For Girl Scout Troop #1558, this cleanup effort was the culmination of earning their Wonders of Water Journey badges; along this journey, they learned to Love Water, Save Water, Share (ways to protect) Water. These Brownies joined forces with the GMU Green Patriots and went on campus to spread their message, raise awareness, and educate the GMU community. They found great receptiveness to the message, and a fair number of GMU students participated in the April cleanup, so we are hopeful that changes will (slowly) be seen.

Why wait for more watershed workdays to make both your local habitat and downstream areas a better, healthier place? First and foremost, properly disposing of trash in garbage cans or recycle bins is the best approach. Or as the Girl Scouts say, **“Don’t be lazy and don’t litter!”**

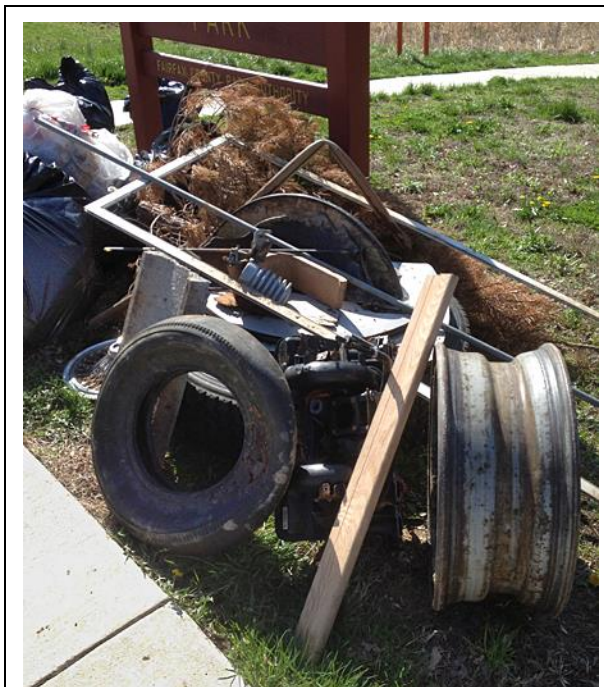


Figure 1. This image displays some of the volume and diversity of garbage pulled from the Rabbit Branch watershed. Photo by Sarah Lennon.

A huge "Thank You!" goes out to the individuals and families who remove refuse along the trails and shorelines whenever they walk around LBSV. We also thank everyone who picks up after their pets and throws the bag into a garbage receptacle. With summer vacation right around the corner, let's make a pledge to take this same caring ethic with us as we go on vacations and help clear trash along a beach or other favorite hideaway! Those parks are equally grateful for the assistance. Plus, sharing this sense of community encourages others to care more about our environment. If everyone would find **just one other person who cares**, inspire and motivate him or her, it will make a world of difference!



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<http://www.independent.com/news/2015/mar/02/crushing-problem-ocean-plastics/>

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