

## Terrible Trash

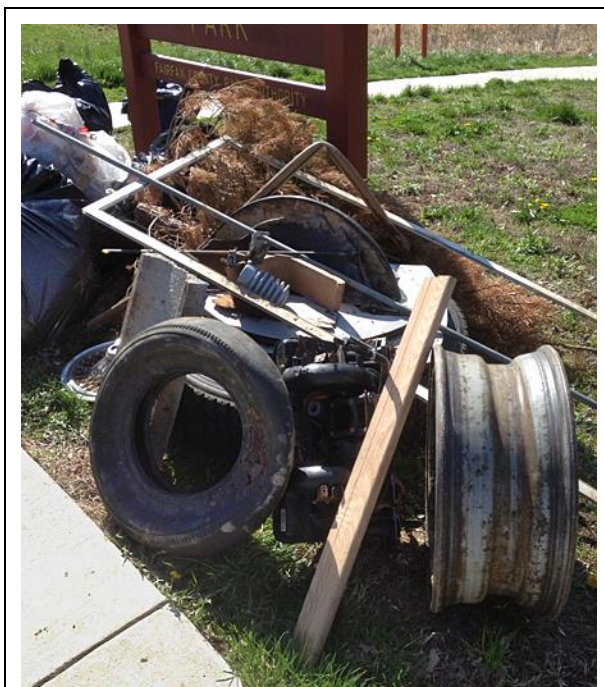
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On April 11<sup>th</sup>, many park groups and caring individuals partook in the first Braddock District-wide watershed cleanup. Organizations within the KPW area came to help in full force, including folks with the Parks & Lakes Committee, Road Raiders, representatives from four or five different Girl Scout troops, and the newly formed Friends of Royal Lake. Collectively, the local volunteers hauled trash out of the shoreline, from the area between the dam and Guinea Road, up Shanes Creek and Glen Cove II's storm drain outfalls, and the entire length of Rabbit Branch. Contents 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, and an oxygen tank! At Rabbit Branch Park alone, about 10 gigantic plastic bags (think bigger than your garbage can that you drag to the curb each week) were filled with trash and recyclables.

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, two major tributaries empty into Royal Lake: Rabbit Branch winds its way from George Mason University (GMU) and the shorter Shanes Creek bubbles out from a drain under the grounds of Robinson Secondary School. In addition to including much of GMU, Royal Lake's quaint watershed is approximately bordered by Sideburn Road, Zion Drive, Guinea Road, Twinbrook Road, and Braddock Road. The dam is close to where the two original streams converged years ago. If folks act responsibly, such a small area at headwaters should be easy to keep clean. Otherwise, water leaving the lake carries pollutants into Pohick Creek, Pohick 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.



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

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!**” Join the KPW Road Raiders who take action for 30 minutes a month to eliminate the trash before it washes away, thereby helping to keep the neighborhood tidy. You can learn about the fledgling effort to establish a Friends of Rabbit Branch Stream Valley by visiting our Facebook page <https://www.facebook.com/groups/watershed.cleanup/> and contacting Sarah Lennon. Please consider joining the KPWCA Parks & Lakes Committee which works with the local Friends groups to keep our community parks and lakes looking great and supporting a healthy environment. For more information, e-mail [Parks@KPWCA.ORG](mailto:Parks@KPWCA.ORG) and check out <http://www.kpwca.org/images/committees/parkslakescommittee/dec2012.pdf>.



A huge “Thank You!” goes out to the individuals and families who remove refuse along the trails and shorelines whenever they walk around Royal Lake. We also thank everyone who picks up after their pets and throws the bag into a garbage receptacle. “Let’s all commit to try to keep it looking nice,” say the Girl Scouts! 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 KPW 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!

More to read at:

<http://www.scientificamerican.com/article/plastic-not-so-fantastic/>  
<http://news.nationalgeographic.com/news/2010/03/100302-new-ocean-trash-garbage-patch/>  
<http://www.atlasobscura.com/places/north-atlantic-garbage-patch>  
<http://www.independent.com/news/2015/mar/02/crushing-problem-ocean-plastics/>

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