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Trash pickup extends beyond local interests

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By Jenny Blaker October 1, 2010 12:00 am

Cotati Creek Critters (CCC) will host their third annual Fall Trash Pickup along the Laguna de Santa Rosa on Oct. 9.

The benefits of cleaning up the Laguna channel go way beyond the aesthetic values of simply cleaning up or beautifying our local area. CCC will collect trash from the waterway and nearby areas before winter rains wash it downstream into the less urban, more natural areas of the Laguna de Santa Rosa, the Russian River and the Pacific Ocean. The Laguna is home to a wide variety of birds and animals, including river otters, coyotes, bobcats, bald eagles, herons, egrets, ducks and other wild fowl, not to mention steelhead and endangered salmon. It makes sense to rescue any trash before it causes damage to wildlife and pollutes this area's water supply, which comes from the Russian River.

From the Russian River, trash washes into the Pacific Ocean. One of the largest components of the trash found during past Cotati events is plastic, such as plastic bottles, fast food containers, wrappers, and bags. Plastic lasts forever and huge patches of it, twice the size of Texas, are now floating around in the Pacific Ocean, where they cause enormous damage to seabirds and mammals, which ingest tiny particles of plastic, mistaking it for plankton. Turtles mistake plastic bags for jellyfish, which are part of their diet, and all kinds of creatures get tangled up in plastic trash and die. It is unknown what affects there may be from synthetic chemicals leaching out of the plastic into the ocean.

There is no such thing as "away" in the natural world. Everything breaks down into food for something else, in endless cycles of sustainability along the food chain. Plants make their food from sun, water, and soil. These are eaten by small animals or birds, which in turn are eaten by larger predators, and so on. Even the largest predators die and decompose, and their components are cycled back into the web of life by the decomposers - bacteria, worms, and other tiny creatures, turning detritus into soil, which in turn becomes food for plants.

It's become so easy to think in terms of tossing something "away," but even in landfills trash causes problems. Although the amount of trash generated per person in Sonoma County is slowly declining as more people "reduce, reuse, recycle," it is estimated that a further 70 percent of what we currently dispose of as "trash" could be recovered for recycling or composting. Approximately 35 percent of what gets thrown away in the residential waste stream is food waste that could be composted at home. Vegetative food waste can be recycled in the curbside yard waste containers via the municipal composting program operated by Sonoma Compost Company under contract with the Sonoma County Waste Management Agency. A further 16 percent of our overall "trash" is paper that could be recycled. One-third of all waste generated by Californians is packaging, which could be vastly reduced by using less of it, designing it better, recycling it, or making it from recycled materials.

How about "reduce, reuse, restore, repair, recycle, rethink, redesign" as the new motto? That is, redesign the systems that support generating so much "waste"? The latest buzz word in the world of waste management is EPR - Extended Product Responsibility, which puts the responsibility for product stewardship into the hands of those who create the products in the first place. In 2004, the California legislature passed AB2901, which requires retailers selling cell phones to take back used cell phones for recycling. AB1125, passed in 2005, requires retailers take back rechargeable batteries from customers. Meanwhile, citizens can all make better choices about what they buy, buy less, and reduce the amount of trash added to the waste stream.

The Oct. 9 event will be held in collaboration with Sonoma County Water Agency, the City of Cotati, North Bay Corporation, Transition Cotati, and C-CORP (Concerned Citizens of Rohnert Park). It is also listed as one of thousands of events taking place around the world on 10-10-10, organized by 350.org (and supported locally by GoLocal, see www.golocal.coop/10-10-10) as part of Global Work Party, an international day of action on climate change.

Jenny Blaker is Outreach Coordinator of the Cotati Creek Critters. With thanks to Karina Chilcott of the Sonoma County Waste Management Agency, www.recyclenow.org, and Tod Brilliant of the Post-Carbon Institute for information on waste, recycling, and Extended Product Responsibility.

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