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We are trashing our oceans. Here's how river cleanups could help.

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When a plastic bag is swept down a D.C. storm drain, its final destination could be the Atlantic Ocean.

After flowing into a local waterway, such as Rock Creek or the Potomac, it can wash out to the Chesapeake Bay and beyond.

On a recent morning, volunteers from the Alliance for the Chesapeake Bay and Boating in D.C. worked to intercept trash at the beginning of this journey. Donning life jackets and gloves, they set out in kayaks and used trash-grabbers to pull plastic bottles, bags and other debris out of the water.

Oceans are filled with millions of tons of plastic. A 2021 study estimated that 80 percent of it was carried there by rivers. While many ocean-cleaning efforts have focused on trash that's already made it to the high seas, river cleanups offer a way to intervene sooner.

"Rivers are a major conduit of plastics to coastal water bodies and then out to the open ocean," said Meredith E. Seeley, a marine scientist with the National Institute of Standards and Technology. "Our rivers, especially those that are upstream of large cities, carry and transport debris downstream."

Boating on the Potomac offers a glimpse of the kind of trash that you might find at sea. While the river looks pristine from the shore, once on the water, volunteers spotted a variety of trash: plastic bags and bottles stuck on rocks and bushes, a sandal floating near the Lincoln Memorial, small pieces of plastic caught in the wake of a kayak.

"One of the big-ticket items that we got was a laundry basket," said volunteer Jaren Baluyot, who commuted from Annapolis for the cleanup. "I picked up a bunch of tennis balls and plastic bottles."

Animals can eat larger pieces of plastic, Seeley said, which can block their digestive tracts or make it harder for them to get enough nutrients, or get trapped in plastic bags and other debris.

As a piece of plastic travels down a river, sunlight and microbes break it down into microplastics, which can pose a different set of dangers. Scientists are studying the effects of microplastics on humans and animals, but one study linked them to decreasing levels of oxygen in oceans.

Other studies have drawn connections between microplastics and a wide range of human health issues, from inflammation to a higher risk of cancer.

“Trash may seem trivial, but when it comes to the grand scheme of keeping the river clean, it’s important for ecosystems,” said Kyle Kraft-Culkin, general manager of the Thompson Boat Center, which offers boat rentals on the Potomac River and was the site of the river cleanup. “This is an important resource for the country, for people that live here.”

Organizers of the Potomac cleanup hoped that in addition to collecting trash, volunteers would build a sense of responsibility for keeping their local waterways clean.

“There’s folks that can name the river that they live by, or the stream that they live by, but not necessarily where that water ends up or where it’s coming from,” said Carly Starobin, the alliance’s D.C. projects coordinator. “We’re hoping that it kind of fosters a sense of ownership and stewardship over the local waterways.”

Volunteers and organizers were optimistic about their efforts. Every bag of trash pulled from the river is one that doesn’t end up in the bay, said Kraft-Culkin.

River cleanups and trash-trapping tech such as Mr. Trash Wheel — a trash-trapping machine and local celebrity in Baltimore’s Inner Harbor — are helpful, Seeley said. However, she worries about them becoming a “crutch” that keeps people from addressing the root cause of the problem, which is the continued flow of single-use plastics into waterways.

She suggests buying from companies that are working to cut back on plastic, and reducing the amount of plastic you use at home.

“If your bathtub was overflowing, you wouldn’t clean up the floor first, you would turn off the water,” Seeley said. “We’ve got to turn off the tap to plastic pollution.”

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