

California Coastal Cleanup Enthusiasm, Laughs and Lots of Trash

by Jeff Hvid
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On this single Saturday, September 18, 2004, thousands of Californians gathered to remove manmade junk from beautiful beaches, prolific estuaries and the vital creeks that drain down to them. Some of the junk is just accidental eyesores: paper cups, tennis balls and baseball caps. Some of the junk such as cigarette butts, beer bottles and balls of fishing line is intentional litter by stupid people. And then there are the serious poison products: construction lumber impregnated with arsenic, broken dock pilings coated with creosote, half-empty cans of boat varnish and engine oil.

Nick Salcedo meets me in the empty Larkspur Ferry Terminal parking lot at 8:30 a.m. We worked together here last year as co-captains of the Coastal Cleanup Day. Nick deals with the organizational stuff: paperwork, handing out gloves and trashbags, and weighing, counting and categorizing all the junk. My job is to run around like a maniac trying to inspire those who show up, point them to specific areas that need attention along our one-mile stretch of responsibility, use my truck to ferry collected piles of junk to Nick, and slog into the Bay muck to retrieve chunks of polystyrene that have broken away from docks, pieces of painted plywood, and beer cans slowly sinking under stalks of decomposing salt grass and pickleweed.

I start throwing junk across the channel for others to collect: tennis balls, part of a wrecked boat, empty plastic water bottles, a shoe, a Frisbee, chunks of wood studded with nails, a soccer ball, and glass wine bottles. A couple of women, each trying to corral a couple of kids who are as eager as playing puppies, hail me from across the moat. One of the kids, a little girl who's obviously a handful, starts to retrieve a piece of plywood that fell short of shore when I tried to fling it to her. Both her mother and I start to warn her—but we're too slow. Her feet fly out from under her. PLOP! (that's what butts are for), she slides down the embankment and is sucked into the mud almost to her boot tops. Completely unabashed she immediately tries to lift one leg up which pops that foot out of the boot and forces the other boot to sink even deeper. The other kids think this is a comedy routine and the girl is now about to make a mistake. With some silliness, I'm able to distract everyone, slow things down, make her laugh and inch by inch extricate herself, the boots and the plywood prize without becoming hopelessly wet and muddy.

A pack of fit and funny teenagers picks its way further along the shore, seriously cataloguing every piece of debris they find. They are from Marin Rowing. The club teaches people to skim across the water's surface in boats barely wide enough to sit in. Some are loathe to get dirty, others find it amusing to plaster mud on their pals. Which naturally demands retaliation. These kids worked with enthusiasm that was contagious. Hope of the future? You bet, you should've been there to see.

More people show up, I check in with Nick again. He's signing people up, we send them off to the marsh next to the Terminal, to the footbridge back by Marin Rowing's Clubhouse, to the breakwater at the foot of the enormous statue of Sir Francis Drake, and to the strip of sand near San Quentin where people windsurf. At Point San Quentin we need to pick up a battered kayak: not that heavy, but awkward. A husband, his wife and their son just finished tying down a load of junk they carried off the beach when I shanghai them.



Enthusiastic volunteers collected one-and-a-half tons of garbage from the shores of Corte Madera Creek on Coastal Cleanup Day. Photo by Jon D' Alessio.

First we walk out on a concrete breakwater that terminates in a pit about 6' deep and 20' across. At low tide the pit is almost empty of water, at high tide it's a pool. For years the pit/pool has been used as a garbage can by fisherman even though there's a real garbage can up where they park. A foot of clear Bay water covers scores of shattered bottles, lots of crushed cans, balls of tangled fishing line, a couple broken folding-chairs, and the odd shoe, while floating on the surface are fast food wrappers, plastic grocery bags and white polystyrene cups. When I was here last, at a low tide, I removed 20 pounds of junk and rescued a bat ray and two leopard sharks that some thoughtless or cruel fishermen threw into the pit. These animals thrashed me as if I'd come to chew their hearts out. The sharks were at most 3 feet long but every inch was muscle, teeth (in retrospect more bluff than stuff), slapping tail and skin that's smooth in one direction, a cheese grater in the other. By the time I threw them into the open water I was soaked and frazzled. Then I tackled the bat ray. It was as big around as a manhole cover, as slippery as snail snot, and it was solid muscle. Flapping wings sent geysers of saltwater into my face. Two failing lunges later I stripped off my sweatshirt and finally pinned the ray down. Instantly my right arm had 3 distinct droplets of blood oozing out of 3 points where the ray's flailing barb punctured me. The water around us was whipped to a froth. All I can think of is how much damage I must be doing to this creature. Hugging it to my chest, I finally stagger out of the pit to heave it back into the ocean. It disappears faster than I can sit down to catch my breath. The bat ray may have survived its captor and rescuer or it may not. We carried out the dead kayak, then returned to base.

Nick is surrounded by a mound of junk that's growing faster than zucchini in late summer. Volunteers help him itemize the hundreds of pounds of plastic, paper, metal and poison-lumber that are piling up as moms, teenagers, little kids, students, retirees, dads and working stiffs deliver their loads. We start filling the dumpsters. We fill the boxes to overflowing then stack more beside them. Fifty people removed 3,000 pounds of human debris, some poisonous, in three hours. If you were there I say thanks, and do another cleanup with your friends soon. On a beach, in a park, along a creek, down a hill, just do it. You'll feel good and Nature will reward you.

Thank you also to the Golden Gate Ferry and the Army Corps of Engineers for their participation.