

## **Don't Trash the Canals**

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What do an automobile, household furniture, plastic bags, and dead animals have in common?

All of these items have been found in Indian River County's canals. This is extremely unsanitary (and disgusting) considering that the canals transport untreated water directly to the Indian River Lagoon. For some people it may be easier to dump trash in the canals, especially if the landfill happens to be closed on the one day we take our trash there, but this trash comes back to haunt us even though we think it is gone.

You may be surprised one day to find that plastic cups, bags, bottles, lawn clippings, and cigarette filters have replaced the fish in your favorite fishing hole. Along with being an eyesore, the trash may be affecting your fishing success. Trash that finds its way into waterbodies blocks the sunlight for bottom-dwelling plants and animals and makes the area so undesirable that fish and other aquatic wildlife may leave to find greener pastures elsewhere. For example, seagrass communities in the Indian River Lagoon need sunlight for photosynthesis. As the seagrasses die from not receiving enough sunlight, fish and aquatic organisms that live in and eat the seagrass move away because the area is no longer desirable. That can not only mean a long day of poor fishing for you, but it also affects anyone else that is trying to enjoy the beauty of the lagoon.

Not only does the trash that flows through our canals displace aquatic wildlife, it may be a choking hazard for them as well. Hungry sea turtles can mistake plastic bags for food. Once this item has been eaten, the sea turtle does not have a good chance for survival because its digestive system can't breakdown the bag. Seabirds, fish, and marine mammals can become entangled in plastic soda rings, discarded fishing line, and drifting nets making it difficult for them to escape.

Large pieces of trash aren't the only thing that can impact our waterways and wildlife. Small pieces, such as cigarette filters, also cause harm when they get washed away off our roads, driveways, and yards by the stormwater runoff into our canals and lagoon. Cigarette filters are the most common type of pollution, and more than 175 million pounds of them get tossed each year in the United States. Cigarette filters are made from plastic cellulose acetate and take many years to decompose. When the filters reach the water, aquatic animals mistake them for food. Plastic pieces from cigarette filters have been found in stomachs of fish, birds, and other marine creatures. Cigarette filters also negatively impact the water quality because the chemicals present in the filters leach out into the water. These chemicals can be deadly to microscopic organisms that provide food for juvenile fish. So, what some people may consider a tiny piece of trash can cause a big impact in our lagoon.

Aquatic wildlife are not the only things that are harmed by litter in the canals. People may be directly affected by it as well. We can be injured by stepping on broken glass, cans, and other debris as we walk along the beaches and lagoon's shoreline. Swimmers

may become entangled in abandoned nets and fishing line. Intake valves on boat engines can become clogged with litter and may result in expensive repairs. Large pieces of trash may damage water control structures present in the canals. Finally, a reduction in tourism revenues may occur as more litter builds up in the canals and lagoon making the area visually unappealing.

In order to prevent the negative effects of canal littering, we can simply dispose of our trash properly. This increases the aesthetic quality of the landscape, decreases health and safety threats to wildlife and people, and saves the community money in maintenance costs. If you would like to do more to help prevent trash from reaching the Indian River Lagoon, here are a few other suggestions.

- Report illegal dumping in the canals to the local police department. If possible, provide a description and license tag number.
- Place used fishing line in monofilament recycling containers located at docks and marinas.
- Reduce, reuse, and recycle. Some area recycling centers may pay for certain items. Some local grocery and discount stores have bins designated for plastic bag recycling.
- Cut the rings of plastic six-pack holders. This lowers the risk of entanglement to marine animals if the holders do make it out to sea.
- Participate in local beach, river, or stream clean ups.
- Practice good housekeeping.
- Educate others about canal littering.

Since the Indian River Lagoon gives so much by providing us with recreation, food, beautiful scenery, and bragging rights of living near the most diverse estuary in the United States, we need to work to help keep it clean. That starts with not throwing trash in the canals. Remember whatever goes into the canals can end up in the lagoon and at your feet.

For more information, please contact the University of Florida Indian River County Cooperative Extension Service at (772) 770-5030.