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The World’s Worst Enemy, Litterers

Planet Earth, the wonderful world where all living things thrive because of its innate ability to take care of them. And because of this, people get to see the beauty of the natural world, like animals and plants or even something as unique as a waterfall. Some even travel around the world just to experience these stunning sights firsthand. But when something abuses the planet, negatively affecting it, Earth no longer has the ability to look out for nature and fails to help living things thrive. One way that the planet suffers from this abuse is through humans throwing their trash on the ground, or in simpler terms, littering. People have plenty of options to choose from to properly dispose their trash, yet they still choose to litter. And when they choose to do it the wrong way, other people and other living things pay the price for their ignorance. Despite littering significantly decreasing over the past 50 years, it still occurs way too often today, causing harm to the living things that surround it. However, it is not too late to take action against littering through better enforcement of the law, more trash cans, and substituting nonharmful materials for harmful ones.

The crisis of littering is not a new problem for humanity, but it is still a problem that has yet to be fully fixed and taken care of. The dictionary defines litter as “trash, wastepaper, or garbage lying scattered about” (Merriam-Webster) and the act of littering as “to throw or leave trash on the ground in a public space” (Merriam-Webster).This generally describes what most people already know about littering, which is the definition of the word. But what they may not understand or might have not been educated on yet is that littering is illegal and there are other consequences to littering besides being fined for breaking the law. The problem with littering is that it not only looks unpleasant, but it also has a negative effect towards living things, which will be further discussed in detail later on. This is exactly why something needs to be done about the 51.2 billion pieces of litter that is solely scattered across the country’s roadways (P. Wesley Schultz). If including the United States’ residential areas, there is only a 40 percent decrease in litter compared to its roadways (P. Wesley Schultz). Do the math and that means there is an additional 30.72 billion pieces of litter in the U.S. neighborhoods, for a total of 81.92 billion pieces of litter combined not sitting in the trash can where it belongs. In spite of laws created to stop littering, trash can still be seen all around U.S. cities, showing that people are still committing the crime.

With all this litter scattered all about the United States, it was no surprise that I was able to easily spot litter myself. I conducted a 15-week study on littering in my neighborhood and others surrounding mine. I saw the evidence of litter in my neighborhood almost every week, but only ever observed the person committing the crime once, who purposely threw a used tissue in a nearby planter (Mitchell). A lot of the time, I found cigarette butts that were right in front of my house, making me believe that my neighbor who regularly smokes was at fault (Mitchell). I even noticed one spot in particular one day that had a whole pile of litter, as if the same person just kept tossing their trash in the same spot every day (Mitchell). I could continue to list all the times I spotted litter throughout this 15-week study, but the gist of it is that littering is still a regular occurrence in my area, which is why trash can be seen where it doesn’t belong (Mitchell). Additionally, I am not the only one in my neighborhood who notices this. I conducted a couple of interviews during my 15-week study, asking the interviewee about the problem of littering in our area. They also claimed that litter can be spotted regularly around here and that the city needs to take action against it (Mitchell). And if this same type of study was done in each neighborhood throughout the United States, I’m sure there would be similar findings since this is a nationwide crisis. That is, a nationwide crisis that we should be aiming to fix, not set aside and ignore.

So littering is obviously caused by humans, but why exactly do they choose to litter instead of properly throwing their trash away? One reason that people may choose to litter is that they make the personal choice to do so since they are just too lazy and careless to put their own trash in the trash receptacle (Keep Tennessee Beautiful). Sounds pretty pathetic right? But it is true, most people litter just because they have the choice to do so, and do not care what other people think nor what the consequences of their actions are. They think that their trash is not their own responsibility, but someone else’s. Additionally, since studies show that “litter begets litter” (Keep Tennessee Beautiful), this means that “individuals are much more likely to litter into a littered environment” (Keep Tennessee Beautiful). If people come across a spot where a whole bunch of trash already is, they do not feel as guilty if they litter there because they get the idea that someone else is already going to be picking up the rest of the trash anyways, so what’s the big deal. In reality, it is a big deal because another piece of trash contaminates and negatively affects the surrounding area that much more. Moreover, “availability and proximity to trash and recycling receptacles also impact whether someone chooses to litter” (Keep Tennessee Beautiful). Most individuals cannot stand holding on to their own trash, so if the nearest trash can is either not close enough or is already full of trash, they may choose to simply litter since it is the most convenient option for them. The gist of all of these “excuses” is that humans have the free will to do whatever they want, and littering is one of the consequences of this freedom.

Since people do not think they are causing any harm with their litter, they continue to drop their trash wherever they want time and time again, when in fact it severely affects all living things that are in the surrounding area of it. Since around 80 percent of trash littered on land makes its way to the world’s rivers and oceans (EPA), the effects that litter has on these bodies of water will be the main focus. One of the negative effects of litter in rivers and oceans is the impact it has on the habitat of many aquatic animals. People continually litter and “as [this] debris accumulates, habitat structure may be modified, light levels may be reduced in underlying waters, and oxygen levels may be depleted” (EPA). Because of all these problems that littering causes to the aquatic habitat, rivers and oceans have less of a chance of being able to support all of the aquatic species, and therefore the amount of aquatic life in these waters decreases as more and more marine animals die off. Trash, specifically plastic, has also been found to “include the accumulation and transport of persistent, bioaccumulative and toxic (PBTs) contaminants, such as PCBs and pesticides” (EPA). Plastic trash even “[has] the potential to adsorb chemicals of concern from the environment, and serve as a potential global transport mechanism for contaminants of concern into the food chain and potentially to humans who eat seafoods” (EPA). So, the things that people litter contaminate the bodies of water they end up in and not only affect the marine wildlife living there, but also can end up affecting other people. Even the people who caused the trash to end up there in the first place! For example, if someone littered a plastic bottle that made its way to the ocean, that plastic could contaminate a fish that might later be their sushi dinner. Another concern that arises from litter is “the physical hazard from… entanglement” (EPA) that could cause turtles, seabirds, or marine mammals to die simply from one single person’s ignorance. Yet another problem that comes along with litter is the “more than $520 million dollars a year” (EPA) spent by cities “to combat litter and prevent trash from becoming marine debris” (EPA). This is an additional example of a human concern incurred from littering. It is unique, however, from all the other problems because it is an economic one rather than a health related one. Cities nationwide must spend large amounts of money, which they get from tax dollars, in order to pay workers to pick up other individuals’ trash. The city’s tax dollars could be at work in many other areas where it is really needed (such as repairing potholes), but instead they have to use a huge chunk of it just to keep their city looking trash free. After looking at some of the major problems of littering, it is clear now that it is a very serious subject matter that needs to be taken care of, or all forms of life will suffer from the consequences of it.

Now that some of the negative effects of littering have been established, some solutions obviously need to be discussed to combat these problems. One solution that would be the most effective would be to have police officers better enforce litter related laws since “many involved with law enforcement and combatting litter indicate that litter laws are not always enforce adequately” (Keep America Beautiful). And with this law not really being enforced to its full extent, there is “less reporting of litter and illegal dumping” (Keep America Beautiful) and “additional citizens adopting such behaviors” (Keep America Beautiful). This is exactly why better enforcement of the law is a key solution to the problem of littering. By officers giving out more citations to litterers, a huge decrease in litter will follow. This is because the litterers will be discouraged from littering again if they know they may receive another fine in the future for a repeat offense. On top of that, the word around town might spread about all the fines being given out for littering, further discouraging everyone in the community from littering. Another solution to this crisis would be to place more trash cans in a highly littered area. With more trash cans, one of the main excuses for why people litter is eliminated, which could help to decrease the amount of litter in the surrounding area. Finally, is a third solution that takes a much different approach to the problem of littering. If the most littered items (which are plastic) had packaging made of a nonharmful material, then some, not all, of the negative effects of litter would be dealt with. This solution is unique from the others because instead of it discouraging littering, it provides a way to deal with littering knowing it is going to happen. These are just three possible solutions to address littering, but they are all great ideas that could have a huge effect on the amount of litter in the world.

Now, all these solutions could do a lot of good for this planet, but there are some limitations that come along with them that could impact how effective they are. First up, are the limitations of better enforcing litter related laws. One limitation to this solution is that there are an “inadequate number of officers to identify litter and illegal dumping cases or to follow up on those reported by citizens” (Keep America Beautiful). With officers spending all their time on other crimes that they deem as being “more important,” counties do not have enough officers to go around handing out fines or tickets to people who may be littering. A counter argument to this might be to just get more officers in each county, but the problem with this argument is that this will cost an immense amount of money since the officers will have to be paid, and it is very tough to become a police officer so some counties might not even have the option to get more officers out in the field unless more recruits pass training. Another problem with better enforcing the law is that there is a “lack of funding to purchase surveillance cameras” (Keep America Beautiful). Without the money to buy these cameras, a lot of litterers get away with their crime and therefore the law can not be enforced because there is no proof of who littered. Next are the limitations of placing more trash cans in heavily littered areas. Trash cans are great for collecting everyone’s garbage, but they are ugly to look at. For that reason, permanent trash cans could not be placed in residential areas without people making complaints about how they devalue their neighborhood. Additionally, having to place a whole bunch of trash cans throughout the country would cost a significant amount of money and workers would have to be payed to empty them out regularly and clean them. Then, there are the limitations that come along with substituting nonharmful materials in favor of harmful ones. The main problem with implementing this solution is that there would be a huge uproar from companies complaining about how much it costs them to use a more Earth friendly packaging material instead of a cheap harmful one. Having to use Earth friendly packaging for every one of their products they sell would cut into a company’s profits considerably, so they would most likely increase the price they charge for it, leading to consumers paying more money for the same thing. Because of the limitations of all three possible solutions, it would be hard to actually implement them to start combatting against littering.

In the end, although the intentional act of throwing trash on the ground is illegal, there are many signs of it occurring regularly throughout the United States. All this trash that people are leaving on the ground causes a lot of harm to the environment, wildlife, and even humans. Only through combatting littering with effective solutions will people be able to live in a litter free world. Despite littering significantly decreasing over the past 50 years, it still occurs way too often today, causing harm to the living things that surround it. However, it is not too late to take action against littering through better enforcement of the law, more trash cans, and substituting nonharmful materials for harmful ones. With these solutions, maybe one day the world will be much cleaner than it is today.

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