

Mountain Keeping Column for Nov. 15, 2007

## Hold Onto Your Butts!

By Wendy Patoprsty

All across the nation, cigarette smokers flick their butts out of car windows or drop them on public sidewalks or even in the aisles of grocery stores. Have you ever seen a fellow citizen empty out an entire ashtray of butts onto the asphalt in a parking lot? It happens. People who normally wouldn't throw a bottle or a bag of trash out a car window sometimes feel that cigarettes aren't litter. Why is that?

Cigarettes are the most common litter found throughout our world. Some seem to think that since butts are so small, even if they are technically "litter," they don't really count. But with 1.2 billion smokers in the world producing dozens of butts per smoker every day, the noxious leftovers -- collectively weighing millions of pounds -- are a pervasive, intrusive, unsightly blight on our landscape and to our environment!

To compound the problem, cigarette butts don't decompose easily. Cigarette filters take anywhere from 18 months to ten years to degrade. Some 95 percent of cigarette filters are made of cellulose acetate (a plastic similar to photographic film). Cellulose acetate fibers are thinner than sewing thread, white, and packed tightly together to create a filter. Each filter contains a bundle of 12,000 tiny fibers painted white with titanium dioxide, which can be likened to shoe polish.

An estimated 100 of these fibers per filtered cigarette end up in the lungs of the smoker. These plastic fibers are not going to come out. After decades, most will eventually decay into a plastic powder, releasing 3,500 chemical particles and 500 gases into those lungs, including arsenic, vinyl chloride, acetone mercury, lead, formaldehyde, nicotine, and hydrogen cyanide.

Once cigarette butts get flicked onto any roadway, the wind and rain carry them into the water supply (streams, rivers, lakes, oceans) where these same toxic chemicals from the filter threaten the quality of the water and many aquatic life forms. A cigarette butt will leak toxic chemicals within an hour of being exposed to water. One butt in two gallons of water will leach a sufficient concentration of toxic chemicals to kill a water flea or a small crustacean at the lower but still critical end of the aquatic food chain.

Locally, the MountainKeepers are doing something about this. They have developed a pocket ashtray, or a "Butt Keeper." This little tin has become very popular among smokers who don't want to toss their butts into the environment.

MountainKeepers were able to reuse tins that otherwise would have ended up in the landfill and decorated them with "Hold Onto Your Butt" stickers designed and printed locally by Blue Horse Promotions. These tins are available free to anyone. Even if you don't smoke, the "Butt Keepers" provide positive reinforcement to pass on to your

smoking friends. The “Butt Keeper” is available FREE at the Watauga County Cooperative Extension, 971 West King Street, Boone.

Our earth home is being used as an ashtray by over a billion smoking human beings. Silence lends consent. Please, don't hesitate ... help educate.

*Facts and information in this article provided by Terry Taylor,  
[www.mountainkeepers.org](http://www.mountainkeepers.org)*