

MountainKeeping Column for Sept. 20

## **Stop the Litter!**

By Kristan Cockerill

In 2006, volunteers who participated in Watauga County Big Sweep collected almost 4,000 pounds of litter. Think about how many plastic bottles or aluminum cans it takes to constitute a pound of weight, and you'll get a sense of just how "trashed" our county has been (and unfortunately, continues to be).

But those 4,000 pounds of litter were also just a fraction of what's actually lying on the ground. The amount collected constituted only one-tenth of a pound per person in the county.

For several years MountainKeepers has spearheaded the Stop the Litter! campaign to help clean up the High Country. Why do we do it? First, because litter poses a hazard to both people and animals. Animals eat debris or get caught in it. Clean-up efforts in North Carolina have found birds, fish, and even cats entangled in rope, bags, and nets. Broken glass and rusted cans can cut humans and animals.

Second, litter is a source of pollution. Even organic debris like yard or food waste can negatively affect a waterway by changing the nutrient composition. Many items that degrade over time, such as paper and metal, leach chemicals into our soil and water.

Third, litter is ugly. A littered place attracts even more litter. In addition to the harmful environmental impacts, this accumulation has economic consequences as people are not inclined to spend time (or money) in unappealing places.

What can you do to help? Reading this column to learn about litter is a great start. We hope it will encourage you not to litter and maybe even to clean up litter when and where you find it.

Volunteers are needed for in the annual Big Sweep this coming Saturday, 8 September. To participate, call Cooperative Extension in Boone (264-3061). Sharing this column with a friend or neighbor further helps to promote information about litter and its consequences. You can also

download a fact sheet on litter from the MountainKeepers website:

[www.Mountainkeepers.org](http://www.Mountainkeepers.org).

Unfortunately, the recycling rate in Watauga County has fallen by about 11 percent since 2000. You can reverse this trend by increasing your recycling efforts, particularly if you follow the three Rs – reduce, reuse, recycle. If you reduce how much disposable “stuff” you buy, you’ll reduce litter. Find new uses for items you might otherwise toss. Glass or plastic bottles make great flower vases or storage containers. Reusing items until they are truly unusable reduces resource use and helps decrease litter. When you are done with a can or bottle or a box, recycle it. This helps keep litter out of our communities.

You can also support regulations that target litter. In San Francisco, the local government banned plastic bags, one of the most ubiquitous forms of litter. Other communities are considering such bans.

Most states have regulations in place to fine litterers. North Carolina statutes include penalties of \$100 and community service for intentional or unintentional littering. Encourage law enforcement agencies to enforce the existing laws and even to strengthen them.

You can also write your elected officials to show your support for incentive programs, like bottle bills, that are designed to increase recycling and reduce litter by putting a rebate on beverage containers. For more information on bottle bills, see the Bottle Bill Resource Guide (<http://www.bottlebill.org>).

Through these measures, all of us can contribute to reducing litter and making our region more attractive. It is time to Stop the Litter!