

Paradise Lost-Taking Time Out To Enjoy the Beach

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Earlier this month, my wife and I visited some dear friends who moved away from Vermont a few years ago and settled in central Florida. We visit them each year-- usually in the fall when the weather in Vermont has turned cool. A highlight of each trip is a visit to Canaveral National Seashore on the east coast of Florida.

The seashore, administered by the National Park Service, is usually fairly quiet and we enjoy long walks along the water. Occasionally, while walking, we see debris that had been washed up on the shoreline. We carry a small satchel with us, so we pick up any plastic or aluminum cans we encounter and recycle them on our way home. **As reported on CNN**, however, not all beaches administered by the US government are so pristine. Perhaps the most soiled is also most distant from land.

Midway Atoll lies roughly midway between North America and Asia and 1500 miles from the rest of the Hawaiian Islands. The Midway Atoll National Wildlife Refuge, which encompasses most of the land and water in the area, is administered by the United States Fish and Wildlife Service. Given the distance from land, and the tiny population of humans living on the atoll, one would expect the beaches to be unspoiled. Unfortunately, 20 tons of trash, mostly in the form of plastic discarded thousands of miles away wash up on the beaches each year.

Not only are the beaches littered with plastic debris but the effects on the birds are alarming. Albatrosses confuse brightly colored plastic pieces with food. Not only do the adults swallow the plastic but they also feed the particles to their offspring. As the plastic has no nutritional value, the birds die of starvation. Up to a third of the chicks may die from starvation. Some estimate that five tons of plastic can be found inside the bird population of the atoll.

A concern of scientists is that as the plastic is degraded into smaller and smaller pieces, they become incorporated into the organisms at the very base of the food chain and each animal higher up in the food chain will begin accumulating plastics. I do not think I can directly improve the conditions on Midway Atoll. However, I do know that I can reduce my use of plastics and use more recyclable or reusable products.

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