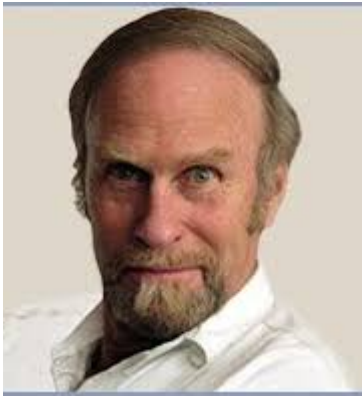


Confessions Of A Litter Picker-Upper: Trashing Our Planet Home



Frosty Wooldridge

While growing up, my father took us camping all over the United States and abroad. As a U.S. Marine, he liked things neat and clean. If he found litter in a campground or in the woods on a backpack trip, he directed us to pick it up and take it home with us.

He said, "Son, always leave a place nicer than you found it. That way, you will encourage others to be more respectful of the Natural World. Besides, you wouldn't want anyone coming into your room and tossing trash on your floor, would you?"

"I got it dad," I said.

(Frosty Wooldridge picking up trash, eastbound rest area, I-70, west of Denver by 35 miles. Two bags a week in the summer right under the sign: \$1000 fine for littering.)

Over the past 65 years of being old enough to pick up trash from the age of seven, I have picked up over 1,000,000 pieces of litter on six continents. I've joined and/or organized litter pick-ups of rivers, lakes, streams, baseball and football stands, wilderness areas, oceans and much more. I even picked trash out of the Mississippi River when I canoed

it 20 years ago. I've scuba dived all of the oceans of the world to pick up a maddening amount of plastic trash tossed by millions of people and ships.

Sometimes it feels like my father cursed me because I find no end to the amount of trash people toss onto the landscape, or rivers, or lakes, or into the oceans.



Most people think of poor people tossing their trash into their own streets in large cities like Chicago, LA or Detroit. Yes, they do, and, in fact, they wallow in it, walk by it, but never consider picking up their

communities. Trash becomes part of their landscape in their minds and communities. It's the same all over the world.

You might think that middle-Americans would maintain their yards, farms and parks by keeping them pristine. You would be wrong. You might think that high-class college students who attend top universities would never think of throwing litter onto the school grounds.

At Michigan State University, my college, they hire over 10 different grounds keepers to pick up trash 24/7. It's the same at most other colleges. We've created generations of fast-food litter-bugs. Last spring, students attended an "Earth Day" celebration on a beach off New Jersey-New York only to leave huge mounds of trash for others to pick up.

What accelerated the lack of respect for the land? Answer: fast food from McDonald's to Pizza Hut to Little Caesars to Burger King. Secondly, really poor parenting. Additionally, 50 percent divorce rates might have something to do with kids being confused, hurt and irresponsible.

One of the things that bothers me: only around 20 percent of Americans toss their trash out of cars, out of trucks, and out of boats. But most people will walk by trash and never stoop down to pick it up, even in the nicest natural settings.

Name the worst culprits: truck drivers and cigarette smokers; teenage kids with fast-food trash too lazy to place it in a trash can; farmers who toss their trash in gullies and into the woods along with farm equipment; ocean-going ships that carry tourists to military ships that toss it all off the fantail; and dozens more too numerous to list.

I pick up trash weekly on I-70 up in the mountains of Colorado. I always come away after an hour with two bags of trash weekly on Exit 254 up ramps and down ramps. Truckers toss 1-gallon milk jugs filled-up with their pee. They empty their ashtrays on the shoulder into the grass. Women toss their soiled baby diapers out of their cars and into the grass or leave it all on the pavement.



And smokers! Or, tobacco chewers. What a bunch of bums!

Cigarette butts create the most hazardous litter on the planet. I wish cancer would catch up to them faster to stop them from smoking. If smoking killed you within two years with lung cancer, people would stop or never start. But instead, 30 to 40 years in the future gives smoker's a sense of safety.

(Open dump (one of many) in Yellowstone Valley just north of Yellowstone National Park) Photography by Frosty Wooldridge

What have I found while picking up trash? I've picked up everything from books, jewelry, pumpkins, box of raw chicken carcasses, drugs, hundreds of thousands of beer cans and whiskey bottles, clothing, soiled baby diapers, human waste with toilet paper (used my rubber gloves and pooper scooper), signs, shoes, bras, panties, flags, condoms, shooters, plastic, needles, glass, chains and a hundred other items.

Why do people toss their trash? Conservationist Aldo Leopold said, "We abuse **land** because we regard it as a commodity belonging to us. When we see **land** as a community to which we belong, we may begin to use it with love and respect."

In reality, we do not own the land. We're merely visitors for 70 to 80 years. And, the animals don't litter the land; we do. As to our oceans, within 60 years, we've tossed 5.5 trillion pieces of plastic into the oceans. I suggest at least another 5.5 trillion in cans and bottles have been tossed into the oceans. My scuba diving exploits around the planet attest to that environmental nightmare. In less than a century, we've made a holy-hell mess out of this planet.

If you travel through India, Sao Paulo, Paris, Cusco, LA, NYC, Mexico City—you cannot help but walk away shaking your head at the barbaric behavior of humans on their planet home.



Since I've bicycled across America 15 times and across six continents in the past 44 years, I witnessed the land being trashed at 12 miles per hour. Farmers toss their tractors, combines and farm equipment into fields to rot and rust for the next 10 million years. I've seen motor homes and trailers abandoned all over the USA.

And, for the most part, very few Americans care enough to act to stop it or pick it up. So, thousands more of us litter picker-uppers will keep picking it up, but we will never catch up.

It's a very sad commentary on our country and I don't see it changing for the better.

What would help?

1. 25 cent deposit return laws on all containers, all plastic sold from mercantile stores.
2. Massive recycling of all farm equipment, trailers and motorhomes left strewn about the country.
3. Education of our children about the importance of respecting Mother Nature and the Natural World.
4. More clean-ups by Boy Scouts, Girl Scouts, churches, civic clubs and all organizations that care about the landscape.
5. What are some of your ideas?

Chad Pregrake cleaned up the entire Mississippi River. It took him 15 years and now, he's going after other rivers. He can show you how to get involved with a river near you:

www.LivingLandsandWaters.org

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