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My turn: No Ifs, Ands or Butts

By Tom Whitaker | *Special to the Pacifica Tribune*

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"I pledge allegiance, as I trash, the United States of America, and to the cigarette butt carpet under which it's hidden, one more, what can it hurt, another non-biodegradable acetate filter for all," John R. Polito

Pacifica is such a beautiful locality. Rugged shores, green coastal mountains, rushing creeks, majestic ocean, just walk out your front door and you're surrounded by beauty. Take a walk through your neighborhood or stroll along beach and look around. It's breathtaking. But while you're looking around, look down for a bit. No matter where you are, it's likely you will see the antithesis of all this allure. Strewn about, ubiquitous, unsightly, a veritable carpet of the world's number one item of litter -- cigarette butts.

Many smokers, maybe even most, do not consider themselves to be litterers. They would cringe to see someone toss raw garbage out of their car window, or leave a sloppy post-picnic mess on the beach.

They would probably hold on to a candy wrapper or soda cup until they found a trash bin.

So, why do they think nothing about dropping a cigarette butt and grinding it out with their shoe and leaving it on the ground? Studies have been done on this by environmental groups as well as tobacco companies. Some of the findings:

- Because cigarette butts are small, smokers tend to overlook the consequences of cigarette littering. Many smokers don't believe cigarette butt littering is inappropriate behavior. Some smokers even believe they are being responsible by stepping on the butts to extinguish them. Many also consider dropping butts into gutters or storm drains a safe way to extinguish them.

- Many smokers blame littering on a lack of enough ash cans. Now that smoking is banned in most indoor areas, smokers are forced to go outside to smoke and are finding no ash cans. Many drop their butts because there are already so many on the ground.

- Newer cars no longer come with ashtrays, providing an excuse to toss cigarette butts out the window.

But cigarette butts are more than just a sign of urban blight; there are also serious environmental concerns.

1. According to a 2008 study, 5.6 trillion, yes trillion, cigarette butts are discarded worldwide each year. (Table 1)

2. Cigarette filters are not biodegradable. They are made of cellulose acetate, a plastic.

3. Cigarette butts are toxic, containing over 165 toxic chemicals, which leach into the ground or waterway, poisoning fish, birds, mammals and other wildlife. (Table 2)

4. Fire caused by cigarette butts claim the lives of about 1,000 people and injure about 3,000 more each year.

5. Remnant tobacco on used filters are even more toxic than the filters.

6. 1/4 of a cigarette butt in one liter of water is lethal to 100% of the daphnia (a "water flea" used in toxicity testing) living in it.

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So what can be done? It really does take a village to solve this problem.

- Enforce local litter laws, including cigarette butt litter
- Place ash receptacles at "transition points," places where smokers must stop smoking before proceeding.
- Distribute pocket ashtrays or portable auto ashtrays to adult smokers.
- Take pride in where you live. Consider the environment in which we all must live. What sort of creature spoils it's own nest?
- If you are not part of the solution, you are part of the problem.

Mint tins, gum packs, or baby food containers can be used as a pocket ashtray. Bottles or cans can serve as ashtrays in cars. Cans placed outside at your favorite smoking stop can reduce butt litter.

Tom Whitaker is a Pacifica Beach Coalition member and site captain

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