

CT Hearst dailies

Opinion: Everyone can help make clean beaches a reality

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A view of Long Island Sound from Darien.

File photo

Nobody likes a nag.

With that in mind, this year's #DontTrashLISound campaign isn't going to be harping so much on the ubiquitous litter problem as on solutions — big, small and in-between. Every action people take builds momentum and positive peer

pressure for friends and neighbors to join in keeping clean our communities and our most important waterway — Long Island Sound.

This year the campaign is led by the Connecticut and New York Sea Grant programs with support from the Long Island Sound Study. Partners include Save the Sound and the Maritime Aquarium of Norwalk. Consisting of social media posts, “Protect Our Wildlife” sticker giveaways and cleanup events, the campaign will run from Aug. 16 through International Coastal Cleanup Day on Sept. 18. The first cleanup will take place on Aug. 16 at Sherwood Island State Park in Westport, with volunteers from CT Sea Grant, the Maritime Aquarium, Save the Sound and other groups.

Now in its fifth year, the campaign this year is asking people to “#DoOneThing” to reduce trash in our streets, parks, beaches and everywhere else. That could be picking up one piece of trash every time you go for a walk, or volunteering for a group cleanup event. It could be resolving to stop using one throwaway plastic item, like stirrers or straws. Or you could choose unwrapped produce over fresh fruits and vegetables in plastic packaging and bring cloth mesh bags to the store for loose produce.

The campaign is also calling attention to some of the role models.

Among them are students in the Coastal Cleanup Crew at Staples High School in Westport, and a similar student-led group at Wilbur Cross High in New Haven. At Project Oceanology in Groton, summer campers routinely pick up trash as part of their visits to South Dumpling Island, getting a hands-on lesson in how careless actions by people miles away end up harming a fragile, uninhabited environment when their trash finds its way there.

“This is a great way for youth to have a tangible impact, and it’s a way of showing up for the cause,” said Anthony Allen, assistant director of ecological restoration at Save the Sound, which is running its own #TrashTravels campaign in tandem with #DontTrashLISound. “But it’s also a way of getting students involved in leadership and organizing.”

Over the next two months, cleanups will be taking place at beaches, parks and along rivers throughout the state, led by land trusts, environmental groups and individuals. At one cleanup last year at Rocky Neck State Park in Niantic, the 25

people who registered in advance were joined by about 60 others who showed up that day. Among them were about 20 who signed up spontaneously. They came for a day at the beach but became inspired to pick up gloves and a trash bag when they saw the others removing cigarette butts and food wrappers not just off the sand, but also from the parking lots and upland areas.

“It was such an incredible event. We had kids as young as 3, 4 and 5 putting on gloves and picking up trash with their parents, and many older folks,” said Michiela Messner of Middlefield, organizer and high school physical education and health teacher in North Haven. “It was a chain reaction.”

That kind of demonstration isn’t just needed along the coast. Inland communities are being encouraged to step up their efforts, too.

“Water connects all life, and it also has a way of transporting our trash,” Allen said.

This year’s campaign comes as the Marine Debris Action Plan for Long Island Sound begins to take shape. Connecticut and New York Sea Grant programs are leading the effort, joined by nearly two dozen partner organizations, to develop a comprehensive approach to eliminating the many kinds of trash in the estuary — from abandoned lobster traps to plastic water bottles, tiny shards of microplastic to fishing line and balloons. Funded by the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, the action plan will serve as a guide to connect the energies of the many groups involved in different aspects of the problem — from research to monitoring to policy and behavior change initiatives — into a coordinated strategy towards a world as trash-free as possible.

“Campaigns like this one help keep people aware of the larger marine debris problem affecting Long Island Sound,” said Nancy Balcom, associate director of Connecticut Sea Grant and one of the leaders of the Marine Debris Action Plan effort. “They also help people focus on doable actions that we can all undertake with as much or as little effort as we have time to commit.”

When it comes to tackling the litter problem, we can all #DoOneThing. Maybe the best place to start is to begin paying attention and let that lead to caring and action.

“Turn your trash eyes on. Where are you seeing trash? Start letting it enter your consciousness,” Allen said. “Allowing that noticing to happen can be really powerful.”

*For information on cleanup events,
visit: <https://www.savethesound.org/2021cleanup/>*

Judy Benson is the communications coordinator for Connecticut Sea Grant, based at UConn’s Avery Point campus. For information on the #DontTrashLISound campaign and how to obtain “Protect Our Wildlife” stickers, email her at: judy.benson@uconn.edu.