

What Floats Your... Float?

by Kristin Andres, APCC Director for Education

If you have a swim float, a float at the end of your dock, or maybe a float on your mooring, have you looked at it lately? Most likely it's made with buoyant blocks of blue polystyrene.

We commonly refer to this material as Styrofoam™, the trademarked brand name for polystyrene foam first introduced into the marketplace in the early 1950s. Technically speaking, Styrofoam™ is extruded polystyrene versus expanded polystyrene beads—the granular white stuff used for summertime beer coolers and single-use takeout coffee cups, food containers and packing peanuts. Regardless of how it's manipulated, polystyrene is a form of plastic. And as everyone should know by now, we have a plastic problem in the environment.

Anyone who has walked along a coastline or near a pond has seen litter pollution—and some of us have happened across bits of blue strewn among the vegetation or mixed into the sand. These tiny blue-turquoise crumbles (impossible to pick up and dispose of) are disintegrating polystyrene blocks from someone's float—a different kind of litter.

In the old days, we might have said, "Oh, just some little bits of stuff in the water—no big deal." But now we know that, because of the cumulative impact of our actions, everything we do is a big deal. Plastics are in the environment—whether deliberately tossed or transported by other means. Plastics have been found at both poles and on the highest mountain peaks. Plastic bits are found in the fish we eat, and a leachate from plastic (BPA) has been found in the umbilical cords of babies. Massive areas of floating plastics are collecting in the five gyres of the oceans. Plastic is ubiquitous.

I bet you can find plastic on the roadside in no time: a nip bottle, a take-out drink cup, a flossing tool (eww!), cigarette butts. Yes, cigarettes now contain plastic (add another health hazard to smoking). Smokers who still have the nerve to toss butts out the car window or drop them in parking lots are just one form of "litter monsters" who contribute to the trillions of butts tossed each year, causing nicotine, heavy metals, and now microplastics to pollute the environment. (See National Geographic, "The Story of Plastic.")

Litter is more than just an eyesore. Plastics never biodegrade. They just keep breaking down until they become invisible-to-the-eye microplastic. Plastics in the natural environment—where they don't belong—affect the health of our environment, and we probably don't know the half of it.

Chatham now has waterway regulations that require new floats to be on plastic float boxes. If blue foam is used, it must be encapsulated with a "non-permeable protective coating." The regulations also say that the foam should be replaced (presumably upgraded to avoid disintegration into the environment) whenever repair or maintenance is performed on the float, and that the use of foam is to be phased out by 2025.

Maybe you've never seen your float out of the water. Perhaps you've never given its condition a thought. Don't wait for your contractor to say it's time, or for government regulations to force you to take action. Don't think it doesn't matter—it does. Please do the right thing. Replace it now.

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