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- [Barrio Logan](#)
- [Camp Pendleton](#)
- [Cover Stories](#)
- [Escondido](#)
- [Imperial Beach](#)
- [Oceanside](#)
- [Waterfront](#)

San Diego's most polluted areas

1 1

The grimy side of America's finest.

By [Thomas Larson](#), [Nov. 19, 2014](#)

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Photograph courtesy of CA State Parks

Beginning our tour of San Diego’s most befouled spots (air, land, or water), we stop first for three summer holidays — Memorial Day, July Fourth, Labor Day — when local beaches turn from sun havens into trash dumps. When party-hardy masses overrun Mission Beach, west of Belmont Park, they leave behind swaths of crap. There, at dawn, Cathy Ives, in her sandals and sun visor, surveys the carnage. She’s a citizen trash-trawler, she and her little red wagon, holiday or not, scour the beach for the non-biodegradable: styrofoam and booze bottles (though both are banned); plastic water bottles; torn Mylar balloons; boogie boards that crumble into foam beads, becoming bird or fish “food”; fast-food wrappers for sandwiches; cardboard boxes for pizza; and those little packets of hot sauce. (Predacious gulls pick through the piles or hungrily eye human junk-haulers.) Top finds in a year (from [Ives’s website](#)): bottle caps (20,000), broken toys (4000), whole toys (2142), 1/2 flip-flops (500), pairs of shoes (397), socks (343), plus T-shirts, cigarette butts (the nicotine and tar they release can be toxic to sea life) underwear, plastic bags, straws, cup lids, lighters, tennis balls, and Frisbees. Ives piles the goodies she can’t recycle behind her home, encouraging people to make trash projects of them, like flip-flop art.



Image by Howie Rosen

Cathy Ives

One peculiarity of the American need to trash is its treasure: there’s a market for picking up stuff, not only for Cathy Ives — she recycles or donates \$10,000 to \$20,000 worth of goods to the Encanto Boys and Girls Club each year — but also for the metal-detector sweepers who scan the sand for coins,

jewelry, and cell phones.

Then there're city workers, who arrive, post-holiday, at 4 a.m., bucketing, bagging, and front-loading in headlighted trucks hillocks of sandy trash for the dump. (July 5th, I arrived at 6 a.m., two hours late to get the full trash Monty. That weekend, city crews took out 1700 pounds of crap and 15,000 cigarette butts.) Workers earlier stationed refrigerator-size boxes to make recycling obvious. According to the Natural Resources Defense Council, San Diego spends \$14.1 million per year to "stop litter from becoming pollution."

Video:

Cathy Ives talks about Mission Beach pollution



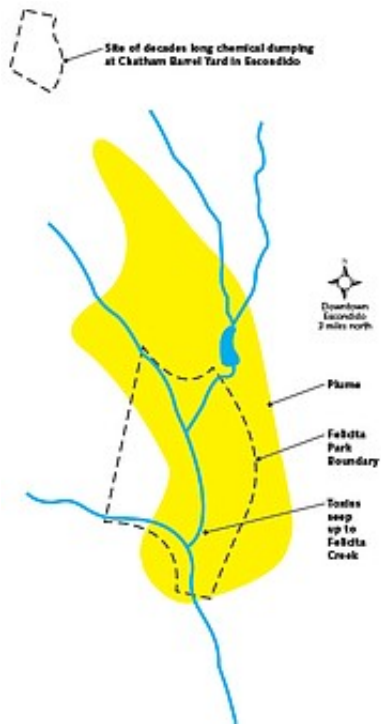
Mission Beach is one of San Diego's most polluted areas. Cathy Ives discusses the origins and consequences of trash at the beach and shows off her remarkable collection.

You'd think beachgoers would want to take care of Southern California's most precious natural resources — the ocean's welcome mat — beach and breaking wave. But with scavengers, city workers, and pollution activists like Ives or volunteer groups like Surfrider, who regularly vacuum up our coastal waste, there's little incentive to remove the garbage you bring in.

I don't get it. Is there something about paradise or national holidays that requires tourists and locals to litter the beach? Don't tourists value our usually pristine shores? Isn't it common sense to think that others are coming after you? Don't locals, especially in beach communities, want people to sun and surf for the sake of the economy? What part of this don't we get?

Chatham Brothers Barrel Yard

The Escondido barrel yard opened in the 1940s, a stockpile of industrial waste oil and chlorinated solvents from Southern California businesses. On the five-acre site, workers stored leaky barrels and buried them as well as dumped liquids into ponds. They sprayed used motor oil over the site to keep the dust down. Over decades, the toxic waste dribbled into the groundwater.



An underground plume has traveled 1 mile from its source in Escondido. It is 1800 feet and as deep as 120 feet.

Though the operation ceased in 1981, the result has been a plume, in this case an underground, water-fueled cloud of toxic vapor and/or liquid that continues to spread. Fenced in 1984, the yard was designated a State Superfund Site in 1985; by 1990, 208 surface and 10 buried drums as well as 11,430 tons of soil had been removed; the cost, \$30 million.

Today, the plume is a mile long, up to 1800 feet wide, and down 120 feet, though it is deeper in spots. It is migrating south, east, and west, largely under Felicita Park as well as seeping up into Felicita Creek, which ambles and pools through the park. In September, the San Diego Water Quality Control Board reported to the California Department of Toxic Substances Control that the discharge into the creek “is causing the direct exposure of human and ecological receptors to waste constituents that originate from the Site,” a violation of “discharge prohibitions.”

Doreen Reagle, a spokeswoman with Escondido Neighbors United who are fighting the plume, and two organic gardeners who live above it, take me on a walking tour of the park and a drive-by of the barrel yard. Reagle’s love of the area and its acre-minimum plots sparks her preservationist instinct: so many Escondidans moved in, she says, “because of the rural character, the animals, the mature trees, the twisty, tiny roads.”

The three produce a map of the underground blotch, ringed and measured by several private and state-run monitoring wells. These wells, at 50- and 100-foot depths, test for — and find — contaminated water.

Another potential problem is that a developer has proposed the 65-home Oak Creek housing cluster, which sits next door to the park on 42 acres of contaminated soil. Vegetable farmers have used pesticides on the site for decades. These chemicals are also prone to wash into the creek or the groundwater, fouling it further.

The main groundwater threats are the volatile organic compounds — dioxane, tetrachlorethylene, and

polychlorinated biphenyls (PCBs) — that can “volatilize,” or percolate into homes as vapor. Exposure puts pregnant women and very young children at risk. Home testing is expensive and, advocates say, should be paid for by the 56 “Potentially Responsible Parties” who signed a consent decree in 1999 to clean up the plume. Twelve million gallons of contaminated groundwater at the yard site have been extracted or treated. The plume is still being treated, according to Toxic Substances Control.

Even before the scheduled five-year remedy review, Reagle and neighbors want signs posted warning parents and kids about unsafe creek water, homes sitting atop the plume tested, and an accelerated extraction — before the bad water spreads to Lake Hodges toward which they believe the plume is inexorably creeping. A spokesman for Toxic Substances Control says the plume “will never reach” the lake. The agency maintains the plume “does not appear to be advancing,” and that warnings are unnecessary, though all parties “are in the process of evaluating ways to inform park visitors” of any contamination.

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Chris Carter · Top Commenter · San Diego, California

Can't stand idiotic tourons.

Reply · Like · 1 · November 19 at 11:12am



Paul Jamason · Top Commenter · Software Engineer at UC San Diego

One positive item regarding Barrio Logan's pollution issues is the dedication of California cap and trade funds to the communities most negatively impacted by pollution: <http://insideclimatenews.org/news/20140625/calif-earmarks-quarter-its-cap-and-trade-riches-environmental-justice>. This program has been fought by the oil companies, and drivers who are unwilling to pay a few cents more in gasoline toward it next year (even though gas prices have plummeted recently). The Comm22 transit-oriented development in Barrio Logan received funds from this program.

Reply · Like · November 19 at 4:52pm



Ray Kunz · Oceanside, California

My wife and I go through the same thing. We live a couple blocks from the beach in Oceanside and it just really saddens me the total disrespect that people have for our beaches. We regularly attend beach cleanups and a few hours after the beaches have been clean they are back to being dumps. I just don't understand why people leave their trash every where when they leave. And people wonder why locals don't like tourists!!

Reply · Like · Yesterday at 8:48am



Cathy Ives · San Diego State University

Thank you for bringing attention to this. For a full list of what was picked up and donated in .5 mile of beach in South Mission: <http://www.greenecoservices.com/a-year-of-picking-up-beach-trash/>

Reply · Like · November 19 at 4:15pm

Facebook social plugin



[clockerbob Nov. 20, 2014 @ 12:26 p.m.](#)

The area around Washington St. and Pacific coast highway which has the big three: old trash, a MTS plastic bus bench that people press on the back of and take a piss and the roads are so warp that they look like they were from the set of 'clockwork orange'

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