

SPOTLIGHT ON... BEACH DEBRIS REMOVAL

Beach Debris and How to Get Rid of It

Those people who own shoreline property get used to cleaning up debris that washes up onto their beach. Sometimes that debris is small and easy to pick up: soda bottles, fishing tackle, plastic bags, and small pieces of Styrofoam being some of the more common items that come ashore. On occasion you may find larger items that are a bit more difficult to remove, such as large chunks of Styrofoam, automobile tires, and rubber mooring buoys. On occasion, though, something washes up that you really don't know how to deal with, due to size, complexity or weight. Dealing with beach debris in all forms is the focus in this Spotlight.



Who Owns This Land, Anyway?

When something large washes up on your beach, or near your beach, the first thing you need to know is who owns the land it is on. Private property owners are responsible for whatever washes up on their beach, assuming they own the tidelands. So in most instances, if it's on your property, it's up to you to remove it. Beach property ownership can be tricky, however, and you may or may not own the land that the debris is located on. Approximately 1,700 miles of our state's saltwater tidelands are in state ownership. About 300 miles are managed by the State Parks and Recreation Commission and the Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife. The remaining 1,400 miles of tidelands are managed by Washington State Department of Natural Resources (DNR). And if the large item that washed up on the beach is a distance from the upper shoreline, it may possibly be on state managed property. When the State Constitution was adopted in 1889, the State of Washington asserted its ownership of the beds and shores of navigable waters up to and including the line of ordinary high water, otherwise known as mean high water. Between 1889 and 1969, approximately 60 percent of state managed tidelands were sold to the public. So the extent of public or private ownership on any particular piece of tidelands varies depending upon the date the uplands were patented (transferred from government to private ownership.)

For tidelands where the uplands were patented prior to statehood in 1889, the private upland ownership extends to the mean high water line *or* to the meander line, whichever is further seaward. Uplands patented after that date extend to the line of mean high water. The *meander line* is the original surveyed shoreline, and in instances where erosion has occurred since 1889, this line may be well out into the Sound. This means that what looks like tidelands could actually be privately owned uplands. Mean high water is the average of the elevations reached by all of the high tides for a particular area over a long period of time. A complete cycle of high tides takes 18.6 years. In most cases, the mean high water line falls just seaward of the line of old drift logs in the upper tideland area. Since the meander line is a surveyed line rather than a constant elevation line, it may be very difficult in areas where patents existed before statehood to determine the exact location of the boundary between public tidelands and private uplands. It is important to know this distinction, however, in determining whether the large item that washes up on your beach is on your land or on state managed land.

If the item washes up on state land managed by Department of Natural Resources (DNR), they would most likely first look at the potential environmental impact, and try to find funding to deal with it. If the item is a derelict vessel, DNR has a program to deal with that, which is discussed in the next section.

The Army Corps of Engineers states in their Navigation Website, “Our section supports navigation by maintaining channels and other structural features for safe navigation in the Puget Sound region and on the Washington coast. Maintaining channels requires keeping them at serviceable and reliable depths and widths by dredging and other means. Maintaining also means removing navigation hazards and underwater obstructions.” Information about their programs can be found on their Navigation Website at <http://www.nws.usace.army.mil/Missions/CivilWorks/Navigation/DebrisRecovery.aspx>. If you feel that what you see is a potential navigational hazard, they suggest you first contact your fire or police department, if that department has rescue boats. The Corps usually cannot send out a vessel immediately, as they go around the Sound on a set schedule, so they often rely on fire or police departments to tie off large floating debris items to a dock or pier until they are able to come by and retrieve the item.

Derelict Vessel Removal



On occasion, derelict boats wash ashore, and determining why they are there, who they belong to, and how to deal with them can be a bit of a puzzle. Sometimes, boats come loose from their moorings, particularly after a storm. Other times, an owner may not be able to afford moorage in this tight economy, and may decide to just remove identification on the vessel and cast it adrift. In any event, it can be a real problem to remove. Your first action should be to notify the police department. If you're in luck, they may already be on the lookout for a missing boat. Otherwise, they may contact the Coast Guard or state agencies to try to determine who the owner is, and if they can get the owner to remove it. Washington State Department of Natural Resources also has a derelict vessel removal program. They have a prioritization process for vessels to be removed based on the boat's potential damage to the environment. If a sailboat with no fuel on board washes

ashore, and is not causing an environmental hazard, it will be assigned a low priority. A fishing vessel that is full of fuel, that is sinking over a kelp bed and has an easily identified owner, would probably move to the top of the list. For more information on this program, which is funded by a fee added to your annual boat registration, see: http://www.dnr.wa.gov/RecreationEducation/Topics/DerelictVessels/Pages/aqr_derelict_vessel_removal_program.aspx. This website page also includes links to Derelict Vessel Removal Program Guidelines, as well as the Derelict Vessel Reporting Form.

Other Marine Debris Disposal

When you encounter an injured or dead marine mammal on your beach, do not touch it, and be sure to keep your dogs and any children at a distance. And never pick up, touch, or remove a seal pup from the beach; the mother may be nearby, having a meal before coming back to tend to her pup. There are Marine Mammal Stranding Networks around Puget Sound that you can call to report a marine mammal on your beach. To report a stranded or dead marine animal, you can contact NOAA at http://www.westcoast.fisheries.noaa.gov/protected_species/marine_mammals/report_strandings.html

Puget Soundkeeper Alliance, based in Seattle, can be helpful when you have something that you are concerned may be toxic and you'd like to have taken care of. Chris Wilke, Executive Director, states: "Mostly we deal with liquid (wastewater, stormwater, and spills) or fine debris (dust, etc.) pollution sources. For these I'd say you can actually report anything at all." He added that his top suggestions would be anything that causes cloudy water, or anything that might be toxic. Or, for that matter, any spill.

His top suggestions for solid materials they can respond to include:

- Anything large and difficult to remove (requiring heavy equipment, for example)
- Anything that looks like it could be the result of deliberate dumping at a specific site, like construction debris
- Anything where the source is known
- Anything that might result in a spill (abandoned or slowly sinking vessel)
- Any area where you would like to organize a volunteer cleanup

You can visit their website at: <http://www.pugetsoundkeeper.org/>

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