

From Plastic: A Toxic Love Story. By Susan Freinkel

Kehoe Beach is a fairly remote place by urban standards: about two hours north of San Francisco, near the end of the long peninsular finger that forms Point Reyes and then a mile-long hike through a cattail marsh and down an old creek bed to the ocean. It's a place of wild natural beauty, but I was heading there for the unnatural stuff that routinely washes up on the beach. Its location, near where the Bay empties out into the open sea, makes Kehoe a magnet for ocean-borne plastic debris, what the Bureau of Land Management calls with bureaucratic understatement "matter out of place."

Most of that out-of-place matter was originally discarded on land. Only about 20 percent comes from ships, and that amount has probably decreased since 1983, when an international treaty banning ocean dumping went into force. At Kehoe, plastic debris starts washing up after heavy winter storms have flushed out to sea all the tossed and lost detritus that's been flitting down streets, blowing across fields, gathering in storm drains, and accumulating in inland waterways across the Bay Area.

I'd been told about the beach by Judith Selby Lang and Richard Lang, a husband-and-wife team of beachcombing artists who have been collecting plastic debris from Kehoe for more than a decade. Their first date was a hike along the beach, where they discovered they shared a love of making art from plastic trash. For their 2004 wedding-at Burning Man¹, where else?-Selby Lang fashioned her dress from white plastic bags and decorated it with bits of white plastic culled from the beach.

The couple estimates they've pulled more than two tons of stuff from the mile-long stretch. This is actually not that much compared to famed junk beaches like Kamilo Beach, on the southern tip of Hawaii's Big Island. There, converging currents throw up so much debris that cleanup crews have hauled out fifty to sixty tons at a time, much of it derelict fishing nets and lines. Such gear is a serious threat to marine animals, and the problem has escalated since the 1950s, when fishing fleets began switching from degradable natural materials to long-lasting nylon.

The couple aren't trying to preserve their beloved beach. "We can't possibly clean it," said Selby Lang. "We say we're curating it." They're using their beach finds to create art that sounds the alarm about all that matter out of place.

They scour the beach for, as Selby Lang put it, "things that show by their numbers and commonness what is happening in oceans around the world." They then assemble them into sculptures, jewelry, or photo tables: a wreath of children's barrettes, or a display of deodorant roller balls known as Ban beans in beachcombing circles, or a grid of dozens of lighters in different sizes, shapes, and colors arrayed in orderly rows. The pieces are arresting. They have an abstract beauty that draws the eye, and an emotional impact that hits as you recognize objects that once passed through your hands, such as the red sticks in one flag-like design that I realized on closer inspection were the spreaders from the cracker-and-cheese snacks I used to buy for my kids' lunches.

The leaden skies were threatening rain on the day I visited Kehoe Beach. I zipped my jacket tight, turned my eyes to the ground, and started walking. It took a few minutes to recalibrate my inner treasure hunter, to make myself ignore the pretty shells and stones and cables of kelp and focus instead on all the junk. As my viewpoint adjusted, I realized the beach was covered with plastic castaways that had clearly come from all over the Bay Area. There were black rubber tubes used by oyster farmers in nearby Tomales Bay; green chains used to stake grapevines in Napa Valley, some thirty-five miles to the east; shotgun waddings from inland shooting ranges; nibs of escaped balloons; hanks of nylon fishing rope; and, of course, the litter classics, such as bottles, bottle caps, plastic spoons, food packages, and a few plastic bags. I pulled half of a green monobloc chair from the sand and soon spotted not one but two plastic lighters, each rusty around the metal top but still as brightly colored as a circus tent.

Plastic makes up only about 10 percent of all the garbage the world produces, yet unlike most other trash, it is stubbornly persistent. As a result, beach surveys around the world consistently show that 60 to 80 percent of the debris that collects on the shore is plastic. Every year, the Ocean Conservancy sponsors an international beach-cleanup day in which more than a hundred countries now take part. Afterward, the group publishes a detailed inventory of every item of debris that's been collected. The list itself is a powerful testament to the degree to which plastics serve as "the lubricant of globalization," in the words of ocean activist-researcher Charles Moore. But what's also striking is

the uniformity of what's collected. Whether they're working a beach in Chile, France, or China, volunteers inevitably come across much the same stuff: plastic bottles, cutlery, plates, and cups; straws and stirrers, fast-food wrappers, and packaging. Smoking-related items are among the most common. Indeed, cigarette butts, each made up of thousands of fibers of the semisynthetic polymer cellulose acetate, top every list. Disposable lighters aren't far behind: in 2008, volunteers collected 55,491 beached lighters, more than double the number collected just five years earlier.

If nothing else, the detritus collected each year is testament to the degree to which the whole world is becoming addicted to the conveniences of throwaway living. But to really appreciate the toll that this is taking on the planet, you have to head away from the coast and out into the deep reaches of the ocean.

1 Burning Man-annual art festival that takes place in Nevada

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Question 1

Part A

What is one reason the author finds the piece of art developed from cracker and-cheese snack spreaders to be arresting in paragraph 5?

- A. The piece of art is confusing and requires her to look more closely at it in order to understand it.
- B. It reminds the author of the times she and her children had spent at the beach.
- C. The author is impressed by the size of the piece of art.
- D. It highlights how such an ordinary part of daily life can become a serious pollutant.

Part B

Which phrase from paragraph 5 provides direct evidence of the answer for Part A?

- A. “emotional impact”
- B. “recognize objects”
- C. “closer inspection”
- D. “kids’ lunches”

Question 2:

Part A

According to the author, what do the Langs hope to achieve through their efforts with plastic trash?

- A. They want to point out the commercial potential of overlooked resources
- B. They want to challenge the standard view of what constitutes sculpture.
- C. They want to restore a landscape to the state it was in during their youth
- D. They want to raise public awareness about an environmental issue.

Part B

Which statement in the passage most clearly shows what the Langs hope to achieve through their efforts?

- A. “For their 2004 wedding—at Burning Man, where else? – Selby Lang fashioned her dress from white plastic bags and decorated it with bits of white plastic culled from the beach.” (paragraph 3)
- B. “The couple estimates they’ve pulled more than two tons of stuff from the mile-long stretch.” (paragraph 4)

- C. “The couple aren’t trying to preserve their beloved beach.” (paragraph 5)
- D. “They’re using their beach finds to create art that sounds the alarm about all that matter out of place.” (paragraph 5)

Question 3

Part A

What does the phrase the litter classics in paragraph 6 suggest about the author’s feelings toward “bottles, bottle caps, plastic spoons, food packages, and a dew plastic bags”?

- A. She is sadly aware of the negligence that leads to these commonly found types of litter.
- B. She is frequently surprised by the amount and variety of litter found throughout the world
- C. She is insistent that more of this kind of litter should be recycled.
- D. She is appreciative of the inherent value of these common types of litter.

Part B

Which statement in the passage builds on the significance of the phrase the litter classics?

- A. “Plastic makes up only about 10 percent of all the garbage the world produces...” (Paragraph 7)
- B. “Every year, the Ocean Conservancy sponsors an international beach-cleanup day...” (paragraph 7)
- C. “if nothing else, the detritus collected each year is testament to the degree to which the whole world is becoming addicted to the conveniences of throwaway living.” (paragraph 8)
- D. “But to really appreciate the toll that this is taking on the planet, you have to head away from the coast and out into the deep reaches of the ocean.” (paragraph 8)

Question 4

Part A

What is the meaning of the word *uniformity* as it is used in paragraph 7?

- A. Made of artificial materials
- B. Having a similar nature
- C. Rarely found
- D. Easily disposable

Part B

Which excerpt from paragraph 7 best clarifies the meaning of *uniformity*?

- A. "...60 to 80 percent of the debris that collects on the shore is plastic.
- B. "...volunteers inevitably come across much the same stuff..."
- C. "... each made up of thousands of fibers of the semisynthetic polymer cellulose acetate..."
- D. "... more than double the number collected just five years earlier."

Question 5

Part A

What is the primary purpose of the passage?

- A. To offer a creative solution to the problem of plastic trash on seashores
- B. To discuss the perils of plastic trash to seashore ecosystems
- C. To explain the source of most plastic trash found on seashore
- D. To describe the excess of plastic trash along seashores

Part B

Which excerpt best supports the primary purpose of the passage?

- A. “Only about 20 percent comes from ships, and that amount has probably decreased since 1983, when an international treaty banning ocean dumping went into force.” (paragraph 2)
- B. “Their first date was a hike along the beach, where they discovered they shared a love of making art from plastic trash.” (paragraph 3)
- C. “Such gear is a serious threat to marine animals, and the problem has escalated since the 1950s, when fishing fleets began switching from degradable natural materials to long-lasting nylon.” (paragraph 4)
- D. “As a result, beach surveys around the world consistently show that 60 to 80 percent of the debris that collect on the shore is plastic.” (paragraph 7)

Question 6

Part A

What purpose does the setting of Kehoe Beach play in the passage as a whole?

- A. It presents an unusual perspective on common practice.
- B. It exhibits the surprising consequence of a recent discovery.
- C. It provides a particular example of a widespread occurrence.
- D. It suggests a complex reason for a popular trend.

Part B

Which excerpt best highlights the role that the setting of Kehoe Beach plays in the passage?

- A. "Kehoe Beach is a fairly remote place by urban standards: about two hours north of San Francisco, near the end of the long peninsular finger that forms Point Reyes and

then a mile-long hike through a cattail marsh and down an old creek bed to the ocean." (paragraph 1)

- B."At Kehoe, plastic debris starts washing up after heavy winter storms have flushed out to sea all the tossed and lost detritus that's been flitting down streets, blowing across fields, gathering in storm drains, and accumulating in inland waterways across the Bay Area." (paragraph 2)
- C."I'd been told about the beach by Judith Selby Lang and Richard Lang, a husband-and-wife team of beach combing artists who have been collecting plastic debris from Kehoe for more than a decade." (paragraph 3)
- D."The leaden skies were threatening rain on the day I visited Kehoe Beach. I zipped my jacket tight, turned my eyes to the ground, and started walking. It took a few minutes to recalibrate my inner treasure hunter, to make myself ignore the pretty shells and stones and cables of kelp and focus instead on all the junk." (paragraph 6)