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Thursday, October 14, 2010

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### 'There is no island of plastic trash ... it's worse'

Expert says garbage collects in areas where ocean currents flow in a circular motion, known as gyres.

BY ANDY PIPER TH STAFF WRITER

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**Photo by: TH: Andy Piper**

Marcus Erikson studies the affects of plastic pollution in the oceans.

The famed Texas-sized garbage patch swirling in the Pacific Ocean doesn't exist, according to Dr. Marcus Erikson, of the Algalita Research Foundation in Long Beach, Calif.

"There is no island of plastic trash," Erikson said. "It's actually much worse than that. The truth is, it's a confetti of waste spread over the entire ocean surface."

Erikson spent last weekend informing visitors at the National Mississippi River Museum & Aquarium that most of the debris originates on land before taking a long, circuitous journey to the world's oceans.

He said the debris collects in areas where currents flow in a circular motion, known as gyres. Erikson said there are five gyres and he has visited four of them, most notably in the North Pacific and North Atlantic. When plastic products end up on the ground, they travel downhill, he said, and the middle of the ocean is downhill from everywhere.

"The biggest thing people can do is reduce their consumption of plastic," Erikson said. "Bring your own bottle, your own coffee mug, your own bag to the store. I challenge everyone to take a good look around the next time you're at the

grocery store. Everything has plastic and not just the bags. Packaging and labeling is made for a one-time use, but it's designed to last forever."

The Dubuque City Council has asked staff to research strategies to reduce and virtually eliminate the use of plastic shopping bags by 2014. Scott Dittmer, of Dittmer Recycling, is a leading proponent of the concept.

"I wish they were outlawed," Dittmer said Tuesday, as he gave Erikson a tour of his West End facility. "People don't understand what goes on."

Dittmer said the facility takes in 40 cubic yards of plastic bags per day, all of which goes to a landfill.

"You're not doing the world any good by putting those bags or any plastic film in your recycling bin," Dittmer said. "If you want to do the world some good, use reusable shopping bags or paper."

Dittmer said while there are some markets for recycling

#### plastic bottle raft

In 2008, Dr. Marcus Erikson and Joel Paschal drifted from Long Beach, Calif., to Hawaii on a raft constructed of 15,000 plastic bottles.

The idea originated during the first Gulf War.

Erikson and another Marine decided if they survived the war, they would build a raft and float down the Mississippi like Huck Finn.

He couldn't find his friend after the war, but he still built a small raft of plastic bottles. He brought that raft to the National Mississippi River Museum & Aquarium last week.

"Seven years ago, Jerry Enzler (museum director) literally helped pull my raft out of the water," Erikson said

plastic bags, such as Iowa's Build with Bags campaign, there aren't nearly enough to handle the volume. The product is lightweight, gums up his machines and Dittmer has no place to store it while trying to accumulate a semi load. It would be at a great financial loss if he did store and sell it.

Paul Schultz, Dubuque's resource management coordinator, who oversees the city's curbside recycling program, said it costs about \$4,000 to process one ton of plastic film; it generates about \$32 in the marketplace. Schultz said only 5 percent of all plastic ever gets recycled.

"Recycling is failure," Schultz said. "It's not absolute failure, but we really need to be working upstream and emphasizing ways to reduce and reuse."

Schultz said people think all recycling centers recycle plastic bags without realizing the costs involved with doing so.

"We've got to reach the point where those bags aren't coming here," Schultz said. "If you want to recycle it, put it in the Build with Bags containers at the stores."

When it comes to the mantra "reduce, reuse, recycle," Dittmer reminds people he's third on the list and should be considered the third option.

"People's habits aren't going to change enough to put me out of business," Dittmer said. "I'm not worried about that. My focus is in trying to teach people what to buy. Plastic shopping bags and plastic water bottles are outlawed at my house."

Beyond the pollution, Erikson said plastic is posing a health risk for humans as it enters the food chain. He said plastic is not only a petroleum-based product, but it also absorbs pesticides and other toxins. As plastic breaks down in the ocean, marine life mistake it for food and ingest it. When those creatures are caught by fishermen and end up on dinner plates, those toxins remain.

Erikson said attempting to clean the ocean of plastic debris is like trying to clean the air with a vacuum cleaner.

"Go back to the source," Erikson said. "You can pick up more trash in any American river in one hour than you can collect in a month at sea."

ERIKSON SAID.

"I am taking my raft to six museums ... and I had to stop back in Dubuque."

Visit [junkraft.com](http://junkraft.com) to learn more about the trip and the effects of plastic pollution.

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