

Island View: Swimming with Trash

BY INA, ESU & ASIA LUNA

Dear Fire Islanders,
Perhaps it was Al Gore's Live Earth Day-the big international concert to create awareness of global warming which may have accomplished a longer lasting effect for the planet than Bush being in the White House for the past 7 years...

Perhaps it was Ina, my Maine Mountain Mama Jama who grew up in the backwoods of New England and knows how to pay attention, still in rhythm with the natural cycles of the earth and sky, trees and water, who asked me if I saw how much trash the ocean was washing ashore...



Trash and broken glass on the dunes.

Perhaps it was Asia Luna, my 11-year old daughter and her two best friends, Emilyn and Freya, who came to Fire Island in July and together with Ina and me picked up bags and bags of garbage and other bits and pieces of nastiness that people who enjoy Fire Island leave behind on the beach...

Perhaps it was simply time for me to open my eyes, ready for the proverbial DING moment that occurred when I truly heard what Ina and Emilyn were telling me-that there's trash on the beach, that the ocean is washing it in, that people are just sitting in it, that people are littering the beach on top of it, that it's making them sick and sad and angry...

The true realization didn't come all at once, it came slowly after a few days, days in which I saw that I was swimming with trash-not like a sea of trash, but the occasional plastic bag, balloons tied to balloon string (by the end we were ready to start an anti-balloon cam-

paign, so bad is the problem and so many balloons did we all pick up off the beach. Ina even found the skeleton of a bird wrapped up in the string from one.) One day I told the lifeguard that I saw what could be a dangerous jellyfish in the water that looked akin to a Portuguese Man-of-War. When I swam close enough to it I could discern that it was simply yet another plastic bag.

Eye Opening

The biggest factor in opening my eyes to the problem and what we would like to recommend to you all was bringing a plastic garbage bag to the beach to pick up trash. Asia, Freya, Emilyn, Ina and I decided on our last day in Fire Island, as a way to give thanks to the ocean, the Mama, for treating us so gloriously all week, for caressing us and cleansing us, to do a trash walk, or a beauty preservation walk if you prefer. Ina and Emilyn had actually already been doing this for days. Still, the enormity of the problem didn't dawn on me until I got out and did it for myself.

The younger girls, Asia and Freya got to the beach about 10 minutes before me. By the time I arrived, I was shocked that they had both already filled their tall kitchen garbage bags with garbage and litter. I was able to do the same in as short a time. I was stunned. Not only was it so plentiful that it scared me, I awwed at how I chose not to see it previously. I saw it, but I didn't see it. I didn't see the problem, the prevalence, the need for change, the urgency, the outrage... that all happened after the trash walk.

There's a photo that we didn't have time to take and I want you to picture it in your mind. Asia, 11, Freya, 10, Emilyn, 15, Ina, 53 and myself, 41, all holding up full bags of garbage that we just collected on the beach in less than a half hour in Fair Harbor alone.

The lifeguards applauded us, yet around their shed where they keep their stuff, it was lined with candy wrappers, bottles and cans. I found out later by talking to one of them that they pick up trash every morning when they come, sometimes set up large hefty bags for garbage collection on the beach and feel resentful about having to play garbage collectors when that's not what they're here for; that we're pigs who leave behind beer bottles and other trash around the lifeguard's chair nearly every morning. Is it the kids who aren't showing any respect? Yes, and it's far deeper than that. A lifeguard told me that years ago the government allowed garbage dumping into the ocean and that the Navy used the ocean as a garbage dump as well. Although it supposedly wasn't practiced anymore a southwest wind will still blow trash in to shore. Disgusting. I never remember swimming with trash or a littered beach in all my 40 years of coming to Fair Harbor. The ocean is reflecting a very harsh lesson for us all, a lesson about our culture and what we're doing to the planet. What are we doing?

As we've indicated, the garbage is coming from two sources, both equally alarming. The trash that our ocean is washing in speaks to us about our consumer society - its disposability, waste, excess, and the consequences of being out of balance with Nature that are too seldom brought home to our own doorstep. This is a problem to be addressed by us all regardless of how clean one community keeps their streets. One only need look at the garbage float-



Michaela, Hannah, Asia Luna & Zinou with balloons and garbage from the beach.

Swimming with Trash

continued from previous page

ing in the bay as you wait for the ferry in Bay Shore to know that we have a serious problem on our hands.

It's Us

The other source of trash is more personal, closer to home. It's us. On our most recent ferry ride to the island, a Friday night in August on an Ocean Beach-Fair Harbor ferry, empty beer bottles and soda cans were rolling around the boat under our feet. My daughter Asia was disturbed and commented on it in the context of our recently generated awareness.

Bob, the owner of Pioneer Market, tells me that he picks up trash in front of his store every morning. As for what we found on the beach that would qualify as litter (as opposed to garbage that's washing ashore): candy wrappers, last night's beer or wine bottles, empty sunscreen containers, cigarette butts. Did we mention tampon applicators? We also found goggles, towels, pails

and shovels, two full unopened cans of beer, a pocket knife, t-shirts, a cellphone and other goodies-as happy as we were with some of our trash-cleaning booty, it was appalling to see what we leave behind.

Fair Harbor used to pay kids \$5/hour to pick up garbage on the beach and bay. Ina asks why should we have to pay people to pick up other people's garbage? Disposing of one's own trash responsibly is not difficult to do and shows a basic respect for our planet. Claire Walsh, former President of the Fair Harbor Community Association, can no longer even find any kids willing to clean the beach-they don't need the money and don't have the interest. We hope to change that. In addition to providing a monetary incentive which might be of interest to kids between the age of 7 and 13, we believe it's imperative to teach our children that picking up litter and having awareness about keeping our

planet clean is not only cool, it's essential. We are putting out a call for kids, teens, adults, and seniors to join us in creating the Fire Island Cleanup Coalition (this is not limited to Fair Harbor residents). Between now and next summer we will organize ourselves to turn our outrage into activism. We need your help.

We've already been blessed by the Fire Island News for printing this article, and the cooperation of Gene Levy, current President of the Fair Harbor Community Association, who has agreed to put up the necessary funds for creating signs that we can post at the beach, and for paying kids to perform daily walks on the beach to pick up trash. We need parents to volunteer their time to supervise the kids on these cleanup walks. We need help in organizing and spreading the word about this project. Gene has offered to be our point person. Email him at gene.fhca@gmail.com This e-mail address is being protected from

spam bots, you need JavaScript enabled to view it and he'll put you in touch with us. We're looking for concerned citizens between the ages of 7 and 100 to join us in tackling this problem. The goal is to generate awareness in everyone, whether you live in Fair Harbor or not, whether you rent for just a weekend or have lived here for decades. We need to send out a message that litter is not tolerated within our Fire Island community and that it is our collective responsibility to pick up that which the ocean washes ashore.

We are the change we need and want to see in the world. It starts with us, our own consumer choices and behavior in all aspects of our lives. Through greater simplicity and increased awareness in the light of an increasingly modernized and technological world, we can work together to help leave a cleaner, more beautiful world for our children's children's children.