

Q&A to use when talking about Rivers Alive

Q: Tell us about what you're doing today.

A: We are participating in a Rivers Alive waterway cleanup. Rivers Alive is Georgia's annual volunteer waterway cleanup event that targets all waterways in the State including streams, rivers, lakes, beaches, and wetlands. The mission of Rivers Alive is to create awareness of and involvement in the preservation of Georgia's water resources. After our event, we will send our cleanup data to the Rivers Alive state office. Rivers Alive compiles all of the data from across the state, publishes the results in a final report and other publications, and reports the final tally to its partner, the International Coastal Cleanup.

Q: How much trash is out there?

A: If you look at the cleanup results at RiversAlive.Georgia.Gov, you will see that Rivers Alive organizers and volunteers have found and picked up millions of pounds of trash over the years. Last year alone we picked up more than 534,000 pounds of trash and cleaned about 1,300 miles of waterways. This thanks to the incredible effort of nearly 25,000 volunteers.

Q: What are the most common items found?

A: Our Top 10 list consistently features items from people's everyday lives. The list includes straws, water bottles, cigarettes, utensils, plastic bags, food wrappers, drink cups and more. These items are not only unnatural to the environment but are dangerous to the wildlife that relies on the ecosystem.

It is also important to keep in mind, though, that the most "common" items might not be the most abundant. These items depend on what people readily identify—it does not take into account the multitude of pieces a styrofoam blocks and other debris that break into tiny fragments and may not be visible to the human eye.

Q: What are some of the strangest finds?

A: You name it – we've found it. We have found snow skis *and* the ski poles, a child's slide, wheel chairs, guitars, and more. Understanding what kinds of things end up in our waterways gives us information about how trash is entering our waterways and what we can do to prevent it.

Q: How serious is trash in our waterways really?

A: Waterways are our planet's life support system. When we choke the rivers, lakes, and ocean with our trash, we threaten our own health, the health of other animals and the health of our communities. According to a national research study on litter by Keep America Beautiful, "Estimates for the cost of litter show that \$11.5 billion are spent on abatement and clean-up activities each year, and this number probably underestimates the true costs" (Keep America Beautiful, 2009).

Q: Can one person really make a difference?

A: Everyone can help solve or prevent this problem—that’s why we are so happy to talk about it. The choices each of us make every day about what we buy, what we throw away or recycle, and what we say to our leaders helps. If we all do our part to **reduce, remove, and reinvent** we will make a big impact. Each year thousands of volunteers come out to remove many tons of trash from waterways at Rivers Alive cleanups – hundreds of thousands of pounds of trash that would have harmed animals, people and communities. Every year, we invite everyone to join us.

Q: Is waterway trash a threat to our health and food safety?

A: If animals eat waterway trash, they can absorb high concentrations of toxins. This has been seen in both seabirds and sea turtles, where higher levels of contaminants have been found in the blood of animals that had ingested plastic particles. Toxic chemicals are then transferred up the food chain as large aquatic predators—many of which we eat—accumulate toxins eaten or absorbed by smaller fish and plants. The concentrations of toxins in these predators increase considerably as they move up the food chain.

Q: Should we ban plastic bags?

A: We need to think about how to reduce dangerous trash items in Georgia’s waterways – plastic bags are one of several types of trash that are contributing to the problem. Some communities have instituted bag bans and fees but right now we don’t advocate for any particular policy for reducing plastic bags. Instead, we believe that a wide variety of solutions are needed, from product design to better disposal options.

Q: How much does it cost to remove all the trash?

A: The cost of cleanups is not definitive, and there are several costs associated with waterway debris, from educational programs to the technology and manpower needed to remove waste and trash. For example, last year Rivers Alive volunteers spent over 76,200 hours cleaning up their local waterways. That translates to \$1,937,766 worth of time and labor.

*estimated value of volunteer time as of April 11, 2019 provided by <http://www.independentsector.org>.

Q: Does Rivers Alive take money from corporations?

A: We all have a responsibility to end the serious problem of water debris – because we all are part of the problem, we must all be part of the solution. Our sponsors are truly dedicated to making a difference, solving the problem and preserving Georgia’s water resources. In addition to their generous financial contributions, our corporate sponsors organize and volunteer at Rivers Alive cleanups throughout the year and participate on our advisory board. This support is instrumental in helping Rivers Alive achieve its mission of creating awareness of and involvement in the preservation of Georgia's water resources.

Q: Are you concerned about companies trying to greenwash their brands? How do you make sure they aren’t?

A: We are proud to collaborate with companies that are truly dedicated to meeting the goals of Rivers Alive. We are all part of the problem, and so we must also be part of the solution.

Schultz, P Wesley, and Steven R Stein. "EndLittering_ForAffiliates-Businesses-Teachers_LitterinAmerica_ExecutiveSummary_Final." Keep America Beautiful, 2009.