

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 www.RiversAlive.org, you will see that Rivers Alive organizers and volunteers have found and picked up millions of pounds of trash over the years. In 2012, 29,300 volunteers cleaned over 2,100 miles of waterways and removed over 360 tons of trash and garbage including tires, cans, shopping carts and refrigerators from Georgia's waterways.

Q: What are the most common items found?

A: Our Top 10 list consistently features items from people's everyday lives. The list includes cigarettes, utensils, food wrappers, beverage containers – things that belong in people's homes, but not in our waterways. These items are not only unnatural to the environment, but are dangerous to the wildlife that relies on the ecosystem.

Furthermore, in partnership with the Ocean Conservancy, Rivers Alive is digging deeper into waterway trash. Starting this fall, Rivers Alive will distribute new Ocean Conservancy data forms that will help us learn more about what kinds of debris are polluting waterways in Georgia and around the world. The data forms are more specific, asking volunteers to note not just the type of items they find but what they are made of as well. Understanding what kinds of materials are in and around our waterways is important in order to advocate for product redesign or new policy solutions that would address the most problematic items and materials.

Q: What are some of the strangest finds?

A: You name it – we've found it. We find litter like cigarette butts and plastic bags, toilet seats, washing machines, couches, abandoned fishing gear, bikes – the list goes on and on. Last year, volunteers even found a newspaper vending machine and a dog house.

Q: Is the problem getting better or worse?

A: In 14 years we've seen more trash to clean up, but we've also seen more people inspired to be part of the solution.

Q: Considering the scale of big problems we're facing, how serious is trash 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 survival of animals and the health of Georgia's economy.

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 impact this problem. And if we all do our part year round to **reduce, remove, and reinvent** we will make a big impact on this pervasive problem. Then of course each year thousands of volunteers come out to remove many tons of trash from waterways at Rivers Alive cleanups – thousands of pounds of trash that would have harmed animals, people and their 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 a number of costs associated with waterway debris, from educational programs to the technology and manpower needed to remove waste and trash. In 2012, Rivers Alive volunteers spent over 108,000 hours cleaning up their local waterways. That translates to \$2,260,752 worth of time and labor.

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.