



PORT PHILLIP CONSERVATION COUNCIL INC.

Tel +61395980554, +61429176725
Fax +61395891680
A0020093K Victoria
ABN 46 291 176 191

47 Bayview Crescent BLACK ROCK VIC 3193

ggd@netspace.net.au

www.vicnet.net.au/~phillip

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PPCC Inc. Policy Statement No. 10

Removing Litter and Waste Material from Beaches

SUMMARY:

Beaches have natural sea wrack, in the form of seaweed, and other organic material, that is a habitat for invertebrates and a food source for sea birds. It is an intrinsic part of the beach ecosystem, and should not be disturbed or removed in the necessary and desirable process of removing man-made litter or waste from beaches, as happens with the use of current beach cleaning machinery. That litter and waste should be removed selectively, and manually if necessary.

DETAIL:

Natural Sea Wrack: Under purely natural conditions, with no human involvement, there is usually some wrack on most beaches. It generally includes seaweed and seagrass fragments detached from parent plants, and carried by wave or tide action to the strand line where the sea meets the beach, where they become stranded. The wrack tends to include shells, bones or other remains of marine fauna, and it provides shelter and food for a variety of organisms - even colonizing ground cover plants, such as Sea Rocket (*Cakile maritima*). It is largely a permanent habitat, because although it steadily decays, it is also replenished at varying rates associated with the frequency and intensity of waves and storms. The wrack is an important habitat for the invertebrate fauna that colonize it, and they in turn are an important natural food source for various sea birds. The decaying wrack sometimes has a strong smell, but that is as much a part of the natural environment as the scents of wildflowers, although it is not always as greatly admired. The wrack is not litter or waste material, and it should not be removed from the beach any more than leaf litter should be removed from the floor of a forest. There is even less reason to remove it, as it is in no way a fire hazard.

Selective Waste Removal: Solid waste matter, and seaborne and other litter associated with industrial societies, shipping and urbanization, has resulted in some of that strand line material, as well as other parts of beaches, becoming contaminated with unsightly, non-biodegradable or even dangerous materials or objects, such as discarded hypodermic needles. Attempts to remove contamination have often involved use of beach cleaning machinery that removes not only the contamination, but also the natural strand line ecosystem as well, as it is unable to separate the two in a harmless and economical way. The end result is to transform a natural beach into a relatively sterile, raked artefact that lacks the ecosystem values of the natural beach, and its everchanging attractive natural appearance produced by the actions of rain, wind, tides, storms and sea birds. The machinery accentuates wind erosion of beaches, by breaking up sand so that it dries faster in the sun and wind, and it can also damage foredune vegetation higher up the beach. It needs an intrusive access route. Large annual costs of this noisy, damaging machinery could be far better spent on a more selective removal of the man-made litter and waste only, that being done manually if necessary. Removing wrack, such as when people wish to use it as a garden mulch, should be prohibited.

Temporary Exceptions: At a few very urban beaches, with no indigenous vegetation near the beach, authorities might consider that the visitor pressure is so intense in some months, that mechanical beach cleaning then is justified, at least in the short term. In the interests of the whole environment, and not just providing a rather synthetic beach experience, authorities should adopt educational and other measures, such as information notices, planting indigenous vegetation, acquiring land to enlarge the foreshore reserve, and pressing for recycling and deposit measures, to keep reducing the extent of these exceptions.

ADOPTION: This original version of PPCC Inc. Policy Statement No. 10 was adopted by a General Meeting of the Port Phillip Conservation Council Inc. on 18th October 1999.
