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Mar, 26, 2009

## Students sift through sand in a search of plastic pollution

KIE RELYEA / THE BELLINGHAM HERALD

Kneeling on the beach next to the ferry terminal at Gooseberry Point, Chrissy McLean bends over a bucket and sifts through wet sand and bits of wood and eelgrass while searching for small pieces of plastic.

McLean is the program coordinator for the Port Townsend Marine Science Center. On this windy Wednesday, March 25, she and a small group of students from Home Port Learning Center are taking sand from three spots on the beach, shaking it through two sieves, and doing a preliminary search for plastic.

"What I'm doing, Chris, is looking through and seeing there isn't really any plastic," McLean said to student Christopher Klapperich, 13, of a batch of sand she was picking through.

The effort is part of a multi-year monitoring of 14 to 16 beaches in seven western Washington counties to look for plastic pollution on beaches and waterways of Puget Sound and the Northwest Straits.

The idea is to create snapshots of the beaches. "We can't survey every bit of every beach," McLean said.

The first round of sampling, which included Clayton Beach, was done in fall 2008. Plastic was found on all of them.

It was the same Wednesday during the second round of sampling at Gooseberry Point.

"What about this fuzz ball?" asked Zachary Lane Jr., 13.

"If you're not sure, put it in here," McLean said, referring to a nearby plastic Ziploc bag before examining the tiny thing. "Ooh, that's plastic."

Funding from Washington Department of Ecology and Foss Maritime is paying for the research - a cooperative effort among the Port Townsend center, RE Sources for Sustainable Communities, and volunteer citizen scientists like the students from Home Port.

"The sampling is pretty low-tech and easy for volunteers to take up," McLean said.

The marine science center's project began in 2006, when its staff saw small, colorless pellets of plastic strewn along the beach at Fort Worden in Port Townsend. They later learned they were nurdles, which are usually smaller than 5 millimeters in diameter and serve as the starting point of plastic production.

Out of that discovery grew the center's research and education program about plastic trash, which doesn't break down and harms marine life.

In the beach sampling portion of the center's research, volunteers look for plastic in eight categories, including fishing line, bags or wrappers, cigarette butts and filters, and nurdles.

The effort also benefits Home Port students, said Mike Baker, its maritime education teacher.

Taking part helps them learn about the scientific process and the rigors of data collection. And it connects them to the impact of human behavior on the environment.

"It lets them know there is a lot of garbage out there," Baker said.

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