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The Gulf Coast is famous for its sugary white sand beaches, and it makes me proud that people come from all over the world to spend some time with their toes in our sand. It's important we keep our waterways and beaches clean, free from litter and unsightly debris.

Alabama has been involved in the International Coastal Cleanup since 1987, and this year on September 16 from 8am to noon will mark the 19th annual Alabama Coastal Cleanup. The past two years have seen an abbreviated version of the Coastal Cleanup due to adverse weather, but this year promises to be one of the best. Just in case you haven't heard of what Alabama Coastal Cleanup is, it's a program that is coordinated by the Alabama Department of Conservation and Natural Resources (ADCNR, State Lands, Coastal Section) and Alabama People Against a Littered State (PALS). The program enlists the aid of local volunteers to help clean up trash of all kinds along the waterways. Not only do they help pick up trash, but they collect valuable information to help us determine where this trash comes from, and how to minimize it in the future. Individuals or families can sign up, or groups such as church groups and Boy/Girl scout troops. Volunteers receive a free t-shirt and other goodies, get to meet other people in their community, and end their day with the knowledge that they have made a difference.

Over the last 18 Coastal Cleanup years, almost 844,000 pounds of garbage has been collected from our coastlines. For those of you like me that have trouble wrapping your head around how much trash that actually is, it's equivalent to the weight of about 110 African elephants, 264 average sized cars, or 24,115 dogs like my pure bred mutt Naja. Any way you spin it, all that garbage would still be in our water if not for the 46,000 volunteers that have lent a hand and joined together to clean it up.

One might wonder what some of the more common trash items found are. The best way to find the answer to that question is to sign up, roll up your sleeves and dig in! Cigarette butts are at the top of the list, as all of the butts thrown out of car windows or ground down outside doors all get washed into the water, whether you're 50 miles inland or sitting right on the beach. Cigarette butts accounted for over half of the debris collected in the last full Alabama Coastal Cleanup in 2003, and that's a lot of butts. Other list toppers from years past include food containers and wrappers, plastic bottles and aluminum cans, plastic lids, straws, plastic utensils and bags. All of these things thrown out and left to rot on the side of the road or on the beach get washed into the waters where it can kill animals, foul the beaches, and choke nets, propellers and water intakes.

Go to <http://www.alabamacoastalcleanup.com/> for more information on how you can join the ranks of the Alabama Coastal Cleanup volunteers. There are plenty of zones to work from in both Mobile and Baldwin counties, see the website for a zone near you. Sign up now to help keep our coast looking beautiful and litter free. Get dirty for a good cause!