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Cigarette Butts: Tiny Trash That Piles Up

By [LESLIE KAUFMAN](#)

Andrea Scott says she would never throw a candy wrapper on the ground.

“Littering is one of my pet peeves, and I always told my kids they’d be in big trouble if I catch them doing it,” said Ms. Scott, a 43-year-old financial executive, as she sat outside an office tower on Michigan Avenue in Chicago on a recent sunny afternoon. “I see people throw stuff out their car windows, and I cringe.”

Yet she confesses that she routinely discards cigarette butts on the sidewalk.

For her and countless other American smokers, cigarette butts are an exception to the no-littering rule. “Aren’t cigarettes biodegradable?” volunteered Libby Moustakas, a co-worker who was enjoying a smoking break with Ms. Scott.

But dozens of municipalities across the nation have had enough. Weary of the butts’ unsightliness and the costs of sweeping them up, cities have passed bans on smoking on beaches and playgrounds. In San Francisco, Mayor [Gavin Newsom](#) said last week that he would go a step further, seeking a 33-cents-a-pack tax to cover the \$11 million that the city spends annually to remove cigarette litter.

Nationally, cigarette butts account for one-quarter or more of the items tossed onto streets and other roadways, San Francisco and other cities report.

Nathan Ballard, a spokesman for Mr. Newsom, described this as a predictable outcome of poor product design. “There is no good practical way of dealing with cigarettes,” he said. “You have a fiery object in your hand and so you have to throw it down and crush it under your heel. And then we have to clean it up.”

In her defense, Ms. Scott, the Chicago executive, pointed out that her city does not provide enough receptacles, like concrete planters filled with sand. And she fears that throwing them in a trash can could ignite a fire.

Still other smokers see butts as a more natural kind of trash than, say, a plastic bottle. But they are not biodegradable: they contain plastic filters that enter sewers and storm drains, and get swept into rivers and then out to sea, where they can release toxic chemicals including nicotine, benzene and cadmium.

For years, campaigns for heavy per-pack taxes and smoking bans in office buildings, restaurants and bars were driven mainly by health concerns about secondhand smoke, which can lead to lung cancer, emphysema and other diseases. In moving on to butt litter, municipalities are reckoning with the broader environmental consequences of the country’s most vilified personal habit.

Cigarette companies acknowledge the problem. The Cigarette Litter Prevention Program, created by the nonprofit group Keep America Beautiful, is financed by Philip Morris, the cigarette giant. The prevention program’s statistics show that butts constitute 28 percent to 33 percent of all litter

nationwide — measured by item number, not volume. Similarly, the nonprofit Ocean Conservancy, which also receives money from Philip Morris, has found that butts account for 28 percent of littered items washing up on beaches worldwide.

The manufacturers say they are working on making their product more environmentally friendly. Frank Lester, a spokesman for Reynolds American Inc., the nation's second-largest cigarette maker, said the industry viewed the development of a biodegradable cigarette to be its "holy grail," but that challenges persisted. Cigarette company documents indicate that consumers have not liked the taste or the draw of alternative filters.

William R. Phelps, a spokesman for Philip Morris, said his company favored programs that hold smokers and cities responsible for reducing the trash. For example, the Keep America Beautiful campaign promotes solutions like portable ashtrays, more receptacles in public areas and better enforcement of littering laws, he said. Last year, the program had 178 cities or urban districts enlisted — the university district in Philadelphia and the arts district in Dallas, for example — that reduced cigarette littering by an average of 46 percent, officials said.

That approach is favored by Analynn LaChica, 34, who works for AT&T in San Francisco. Ms. LaChica estimates that of the 5 to 10 cigarettes she smokes each day, at least three butts end up on the ground.

"People who smoke use it as a stress reliever," she explained. "It is satisfying to just toss it down when you are done."

Nonetheless, she said, she would change her behavior if San Francisco installed ashtrays on top of trash receptacles. Putting it out that way would be more "ladylike," she said.

For many environmentalists, the problem is not just the litter, but the toxicity. Thomas Novotny, a professor of global health at San Diego State University who supports the San Francisco proposal and beach bans elsewhere, said recent experiments had shown that one butt has enough poisons to kill half the minnows in a liter of water — a standard laboratory test for toxins — in 96 hours.

"Butts are full of poisonous substances, including nicotine, which is a pesticide," Professor Novotny said.

Some smokers are getting the message. Alex Ceruti, 32, a business owner in the South Beach section of Miami Beach, said he had always discarded his butt in an ashtray or other receptacle after finishing a cigarette. "That's the only part of the cigarette that is not biodegradable," he said.

"I think it's nasty the way people throw them on the ground," Mr. Ceruti added, observing a young tattooed woman who cast her cigarette on the sidewalk before entering a coffee shop.

Mr. Ceruti and his friend Marcos van Dulken, 26, who also smokes, say they even patrol their favorite beach once in a while to pick up filters.

"I'm not going to lie," said Mr. van Dulken, an actor who owns a small production company. "Sometimes I throw them on the ground. But I really try not to do that."

Karen Ann Cullotta contributed reporting from Chicago, Malia Wollan from San Francisco and Carmen Gentile Jr. from Miami Beach.