

# THE STRAIGHT DOPE

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A STRAIGHT DOPE CLASSIC FROM CECIL'S STOREHOUSE OF HUMAN KNOWLEDGE

## Should you cut up six-pack rings so they don't choke sea birds?

*Dear Cecil:*

*What's the deal with the plastic rings that hold six-packs of beer and soda together? Is it true that animals get caught in them? Is it important to cut the rings apart in order to prevent needless deaths?*

— *Pete Asman, via the Internet*

Dear Pete:

No. Or at least it's less important than a lot of other things you could do. The emphasis on six-pack rings (known in the biz as "yokes") is an example of the feel-good approach to ecoactivism typified by John Javna's 1990 book *Fifty Simple Things You Can Do to Save the Earth*, in which cutting up six-pack rings was cited as Simple Thing #2. I'm not saying the 50 simple things are useless, but we'd probably get more accomplished if we focused on some not so simple and sometimes downright hard things instead.

Six-pack rings first floated into public awareness in the late 1970s when environmentalists began calling attention to the problem of waterborne trash, also known as marine debris. The masses of floating or beached crud visible on many shores not only look gross, they threaten wildlife. More than 260 marine species can ingest or become entangled in man-made waterborne junk, among them turtles, birds, mammals, and fish. During the 1998 International Coastal Cleanup, volunteers hauled away 10.4 million items of trash from coastlines around the world (including 1.6 million cigarette butts).

Marine debris comes in all shapes and sizes, but six-pack rings became the poster child of the cleanup movement early on after several photographs of ring-strangled seabirds were widely reproduced. Anecdotal accounts also focused attention on the rings: Javna's book cited a 1988 cleanup of 300 miles of Texas beach (beaches surrounding the Gulf of Mexico are unusually trashy) that turned up 15,600 sets of rings in three hours.

Gradually the public, and to some extent the media, became convinced that six-pack rings were the primary marine debris problem. "Marine scientists and environmentalists say an estimated one million seabirds and 100,000 marine mammals are killed each year by six-pack rings and other plastic material they mistake for food," claimed a 1987 Associated Press story, misleadingly placing the blame on rings rather than plastic in general. Many jurisdictions passed laws requiring that six-pack rings be environmentally degradable. All rings currently made will degrade in sunlight in a few weeks or months, depending on the season.

The fact is, however, that the six-pack-ring threat has been greatly exaggerated. According to the Center for Marine Conservation, only 50,000 of the 10.4 million items collected during the 1998 cleanup (0.48 percent) were six-pack rings. Between 1988 and 1998, U.S. cleanups uncovered 1,089 instances of animal entanglement, but only 72 (7 percent) involved six-pack rings. The real offenders were monofilament fishing line, fishhooks, and lures, implicated in 461 cases (42 percent). Add in crab and lobster traps, nets, and related equipment, and we find that fishing gear accounts for almost half of all entanglements.

Despite having been singled out somewhat unfairly, the maker of six-pack rings, Hi-Cone, has been pretty game about dealing with the entanglement issue. In addition to making photodegradable rings, Hi-Cone for some years offered a version of its product with tear tabs that broke the rings, reducing the chances of entanglement. But research showed that hardly anyone used the tabs, so they're being phased out. The company continues to sponsor ring recycling programs; see [www.ringleader.com](http://www.ringleader.com) for details.

Does cutting up six-pack rings do any good? It doesn't hurt, but it doesn't really address the problem either. If you're enough of a pig to discard plastic on a beach, you probably can't be bothered to cut it up first. I prefer this simple if slightly icky way to save the earth: bring some of those scorned plastic grocery bags on your next beach stroll or nature walk and fill them with any trash you find, rings included. In addition, if you fish and your line gets irretrievably tangled or snagged (hey, been there), cut loose as close to the snag as you can and don't throw the tangle over the side, lest the abandoned line strangle the next critter that happens by. Finally, participate in the International Coastal Cleanup on the third Saturday of September. Call 1-800-CMCBEACH for details.

— Cecil Adams