

Are you up for a challenge, West Linn?

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When was the last time you felt the influence of the ocean? Maybe you went deep-sea fishing this summer — or maybe the closest you came to the sea was watching Shark Week. Perhaps you're a SOLVE veteran and have spent countless weekends combing the beach for microplastics, or perhaps you prefer to read about the trash-saturated seas from the comfort of your own home.

This summer, I was fortunate enough to participate in a 4-H Marine Ambassador program called Oceanwatch. We traveled from the OSU Wave Lab in Corvallis across the coast range to the Toledo Oyster Farm and then on to Beverly Beach in Newport. Our group spoke with professionals in a huge range of ocean-related careers, and every one of them shared a common message:

We don't think about how our day-to-day actions can have devastating effects on the ocean.

Some of effects are obvious. When you eat a sushi dinner, it is easy to keep in mind that the tuna in your rainbow roll came from a living creature in the sea. But do you remember the ocean when you take a shower? Do you think about where your discarded plastic bags end up? Do you ever appreciate that up to 85 percent of the oxygen you breathe comes from oceanic microorganisms?

It is rarely recognized or remembered that, with every breath we take, the ocean is there. Yet all our tap water eventually drains into it, much of our trash ends up there and the ocean's resources appear in everything from vitamins to shampoo.

The ocean is everywhere in our lives, even two hours from the coast here in West Linn. It can be hard to remember unless you live on the coast, but almost everyone in every corner of the earth is constantly touched by the massive body of water that covers 70 percent of our globe.

What can we do here in West Linn? As we're a long drive from the Pacific, it's not realistic to expect everyone to bus over for every beach cleanup. It's the little things that we can do within our own homes that make a huge difference.

By reducing the plastic you throw away, you can keep one more takeout box from floating into the Pacific's garbage gyres. Choosing ecofriendly soaps and shampoos — without toxin-absorbing plastic beads — can save hungry fish from deadly meals. Research your seafood choices and only eat from sustainable fisheries, to keep our saltwater friends from going extinct. The little things add up quickly on a big scale, and if everyone in our city could make ocean-conscious choices, we could have a big impact.

Oregon is known for being a "green" state, and we've been raised on compostable napkins and save-the-rainforest fundraisers at our schools. Last month Oceanwatch showed 30 teenagers like me some ways that we can stop our ocean's struggle. The program's organizers also left us with a challenge that I now pass on to West Linn.

The effort to make our coast a cleaner, safer environment can start right here in our city. The question is: are we up for the task?

Beth Hoots is a sophomore at West Linn High School. She will be contributing a regular column to the Tidings this school year.