



Since then, I spend the first moments of every beach outing collecting garbage. I photograph it as I find it: Bent pink straw. Clear, shallow swivel cap. Rubber work glove, tangled in the sand. Dismembered doll leg. I have hundreds of photos, which form an archive of modern convenience and a glimpse of what will endure in the future. People at the beach thank me profusely, as though they are incapable of joining in or as though I'm a maintenance worker. I suppose I am. Others shoot looks of disbelief.

Beachcombers have always been an outsider band. "Beachcombing" refers to searching shorelines for items of potential value washed up on the sand. There's evidence of beachcombing activities along the Texas coastline as far back as 6,000–3,000 BCE. Indigenous people, including the Karankawa, hauled chunks of asphaltum and shells inland. Shells became tools, asphalt was used for waterproofing, glue, and ornament. However, it wasn't until the 19th century whaling industry boom that the term "beachcomber" was codified in the English language.

Disgruntled sailors who jumped ship in Polynesia and Micronesia survived by trading materials reclaimed from the beach. Though the beachcomber eventually found a formalized role within international commerce, until the early 20th century, the name connoted bums, criminals, and vagabonds.

As technologies, economies, and western societies have grown and changed, beachcombing is now considered a leisure activity, rather than labor. However, the littoral zone is filled with many forms of informal labor performed during leisure time.

Outside of boat crews, work in the New York City waterways is often informal, emergent, self-initiated, and performed on a volunteer-basis. Some people perform weekly water quality testing; some organize tours of the working waterways; others create and staff boathouses for public kayaking. Their close and continued attention to the water through these forms of informal work also builds intimate knowledge and awareness of even the subtlest changes in the waterfront. These 'recreational laborers' are often the first to notice beached whales, stranded seals, and foreign substances in the surf.

Those of us who collect trash on the beach are performing the labor of caring for the earth. Offering an invitation, a gentle reminder, a provocation, a spectacle—stooping, squatting, reaching—our tribe is armed with bags and a belief that this work makes a difference. I wonder whether it does. Watching the unintended ballet of the metal detectors—their smooth, gliding motion—I'm mesmerized and a little envious as I clumsily stoop, knees akimbo, to gather up straws, bottles, Squeezers lids and the other castoffs of modern convenience.