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Sea of glass

By Beth Daley, Globe Staff, 7/13/2003

YARMOUTH -- The downside of a cleaner environment is found in the empty palms of tourists on the long stretches of Cape Cod beaches: There is hardly any sea glass, those muted shards rubbed smooth by endless waves.

Litter laws and the demise of glass containers have forced lovers of the opaque slivers tumbled for generations in the ocean to resort to unusual means in their quest for the frosted bits of colored glass.

One Massachusetts jewelry maker recently sent out a plea for sea glass in the Cape Cod Times. Two years ago, a Provincetown boat captain refused to take a woman out to sea to dump bottles overboard to seed the sea for future beachcombers.

"I know of a number of beachgoers who have decided to take matters into their own hands," said Bruce Berman of Boston's Save the Harbor/Save the Bay. Berman said sea glass lovers have dumped glass around rocky ledges off Boston's Harbor Islands, thinking that that it won't wash up on beaches where it could cut feet. But tidal action will push the glass south.

"I expect we'll see blue sea glass on the Cape in a number of years because of their efforts," he said.

The pitted bits of drinking glasses, containers, and beer bottles from shipwrecks and careless boaters have long been the stuff of legend and romance. Often called mermaids' tears or sea gems, the perfect specimens can take decades to lose their jagged edges.

Carole S. Lambert, a Maine author who wrote the 2001 book, "Sea Glass Chronicles: Whispers from the Past," has researched shipwrecks around the world, examining individual wrecks in New England and connecting beach finds to ship receipts. She linked one glass piece found on a Boothbay Harbor, Maine, beach to an early 1900s Lalique crystal perfume stopper.

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Jewelry from the sea by valerie gates

"You take these finds to your office and in January you fumble through [them] and smell the salt air," Lambert said. "These pieces have this romance of sea, pirates, and storms."

Over the years, as shipping improved and piracy eased, fewer ships went down and fewer cracked bottles landed on the ocean floor, Lambert said. Glass products gave way to cheaper and lighter plastic and aluminum, and beaches began banning glass. Garbage dumping on ocean edges was phased out by tougher environmental regulations.

Even so, sharp-eyed beachcombers could find the occasional gem, most likely a remnant of a heavy green Coke bottle or a brown beer bottle.

"Now, it's hard to find the glass," said Karen Fler of West Falmouth, who searches for sea glass at local beaches and has a clear vase filled with pieces in her bathroom. "When I see it and pick it up, it's like a jewel or treasure."

Because of the scarcity, fewer and fewer jewelers use real sea glass, opting instead for man-made "fanta" glass, which is created by tumbling glass for as long as a month in a solution of sea and sand, or by dipping it in a corrosive acid.

Much of the sea glass jewelry sold on the Cape is made in North Carolina factories, and true aficionados can easily tell the difference. Rub your finger on it -- if it's smooth, it's fake.

The real stuff has pits and grooves, said Valerie Gates, the Wellesley jeweler who put an ad in the Cape Cod Times looking for sea glass. Last year, Gates inherited five 8-gallon buckets of sea glass that her aunt had collected for more than 40 years in Woods Hole. Her aunt loved sea glass so much that the family attached pieces to her memorial service booklets.

"I still have enough for a couple of years," said Gates, who sells her jewelry in Boston's Museum of Fine Arts and in stores around the country. "But I want more. I tell people I'll trade jewelry for sea glass. It's organic. I don't do anything to it. And it does [make] a statement: You are basically wearing beer bottles."

Gates hasn't considered throwing glass overboard -- she figures it would take decades to get a return -- and there's no way to know where the glass will wash ashore.

When Mark Finley, a Provincetown boat captain, said a woman approached him two years ago to dump glass off the coast; he refused. Finley runs eco-tours and said he didn't think making sea glass was a good reason to pollute.

Lambert, however, sees nothing wrong with tossing glass into the sea. Glass is a mixture of lime, soda, and sand, so dumping it in the ocean is fine, as long as it is dumped far enough out that it doesn't come ashore too soon -- and too sharp -- to torment beachgoers.

"The beauty of this is if you leave glass in the water long enough, it returns to nature," Lambert said. "It's fragile and strong at the same time."

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