ABC News: Damien Larkins

The New York Times has reported on a stealth environmental crisis, one that the public has heretofore regarded as the mere detritus of a serious public health controversy. But discarded cigarette butts constitute a major environmental crisis as well, and public attention to that crisis is long overdue.

In its recent story, the Times notes the omnipresent nature of discarded cigarette butts in the human environment. In the U.S., cigarette butts constitute nearly one-third of all litter nationwide (measured by item number, not volume). The nonprofit Ocean Conservancy advises that cigarette butts account for 28% of littered items washing up on beaches worldwide. And a just-published scientific study led by California State University, San Diego, public health expert Thomas Novotny reveals that with 5.6 trillion cigarettes consumed worldwide in 2002, approximately 1.69 billion pounds–845,000 tons–of cigarette butts annually wind up as litter worldwide.

This epidemic of cigarette litter has very real public costs. San Francisco Mayor Gavin Newsom has proposed a cigarette tax increase to offset the $11 million that city spends annually to clean up massive amounts of cigarette litter just within its municipal borders.

Yet cigarette butt litter is not just ubiquitous, unsightly and expensive to clean up. It's also dangerous. Most people assume that cigarettes are biodegradable, and thus pose no long-term threat to the environment. Not so.

In fact, 99% of cigarettes sold today are filtered. Those filters are made of cellulose-acetate, a form of plastic that's non-biodegradable. Cigarette filters capture substantial amounts of tar and nicotine from burning cigarettes, and used butts are also repositories for other toxic chemicals, including benzene and cadmium. When discarded cigarette butts find their way into storm drains and municipal water systems, they leach those toxins. Scientific studies performed by Professor Novotny and his colleagues show that leached toxins from cigarette butts can kill marine life and contaminate domestic water supply systems.

As a result of these findings, environmentalists are collaborating with public health advocates to address the myriad problems associated with cigarette butt litter. One such coalition, the Cigarette Butt Advisory Group, formally launched a public education and advocacy initiative this spring.

Cigarette smoking has been a public health crisis for many years. It’s only recently become apparent that cigarette smoking also has grave consequences for the environment.