

Thoughts on sunscreen and the environment

You know those brightly coloured big tubes of white goop that colour every supermarket, convenience store or drug store on Cape Cod in the summertime. Buy more, 'cost' less deals everywhere you turn. Guess what, sun screen chemistry is not only potentially bad for you, it's costly for the environment where you swim and play!

Coral reefs are the most notorious victims of sunscreen pollution, however, other marine life including algae, fish, marine mammals, and turtles can be impacted by sunscreen's toxic chemicals. Here in Barnstable Harbor, we must consider the potential effect on our shellfishery as well as on the harbour habitat as a whole.

Oxybenzone, a known endocrine disruptor, is the biggest culprit. Not only does oxybenzone wash off swimmers into the water and the sand (as well as into septic and sewer systems), oxybenzone is absorbed through the skin and can be detected in urine within 30 minutes of application.

Other toxic chemicals commonly found in sunscreen are:

- **Retinyl palmitate:** Possible Carcinogen. Government test data shows more skin tumours and lesions on animals treated with this ingredient and exposed to sunlight.
- **Nano-size particles**, which help physical UV blockers like zinc oxide and titanium dioxide absorb better on the skin, can be potentially toxic to aquatic species.
- **Octinoxate and ectocrylene:** Both considered to be even more toxic than oxybenzone.

Sunscreen sprays aren't as effective as lotions and sticks. There is doubt as to whether they provide an adequate coating of sun protection on the skin. Further, overspray is inhaled and/or lands directly on the sand that provides breeding habitat for many turtles including our local diamond back terrapin.

Don't simply trust the labels 'organic' or 'reef safe' when purchasing

sun protection products. Read the ingredients and shop for the simplest formulas. Even plant-based oils like eucalyptus and lavender, as well as beeswax, can be dangerous to the environment.



The best practice is to cover-up and plan your day (11 am to 2 pm is the highest UV exposure time) so that you won't need to apply as much sun block. UV protective clothing and rash guards (for swimming) have become comfortable, cool and fashionable. Of course the usual hats, sunglasses and a good old beach umbrella are all part of the arsenal of protection requisite for enjoying a day in the sun.

For more information, click on the links: [Vogue Magazine: Is your sunscreen safe for the planet](#) and [Environmental Working Group's Sunscreen Guide](#). The links offer some information about environmental impacts of sunscreen and help finding sun protection products that will allow your entire family to enjoy Barnstable Harbor's beautiful waters, sand flats and beaches safely.

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