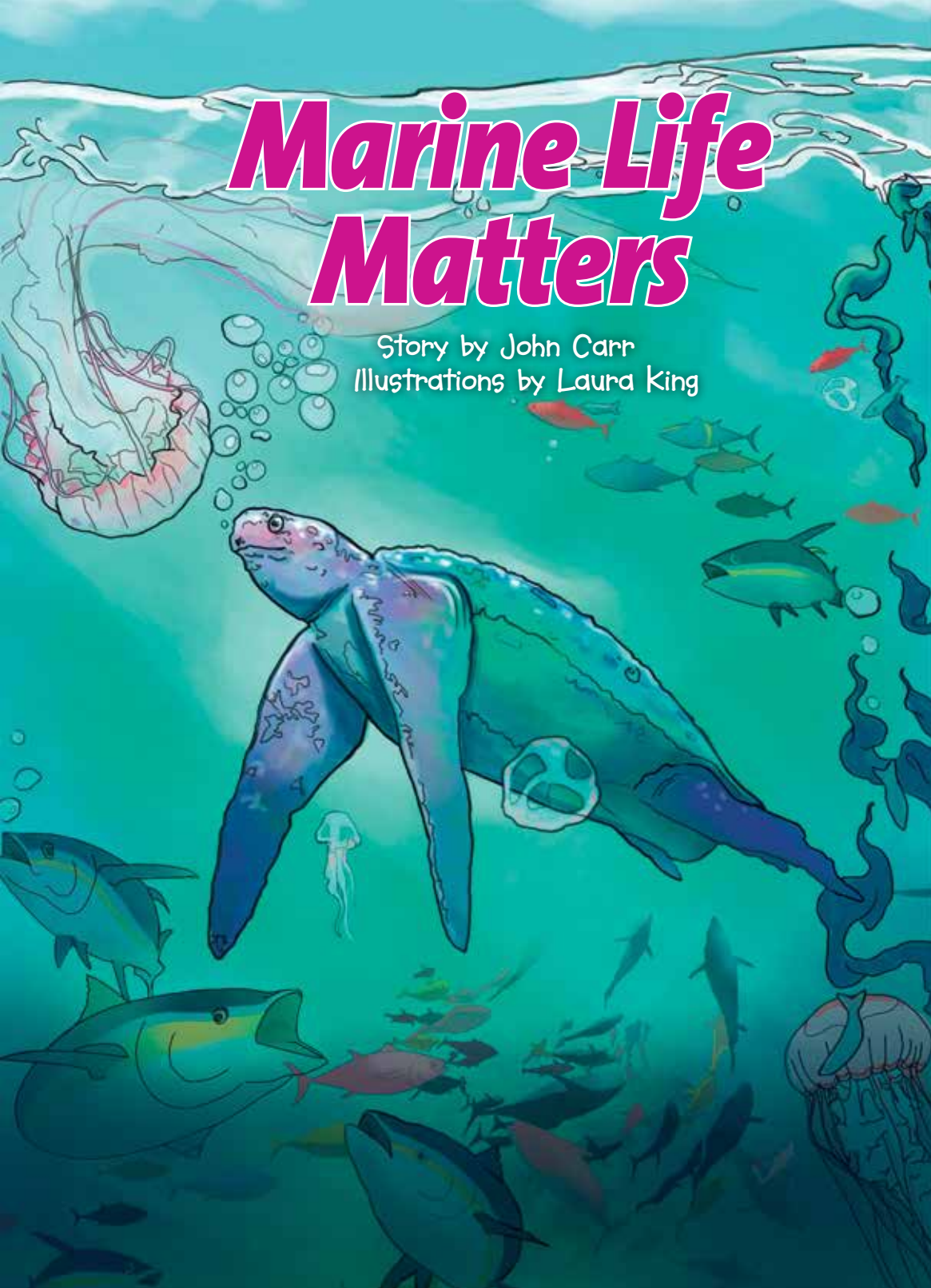


Marine Life Matters

Story by John Carr
Illustrations by Laura King



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© 2020 Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals Education, Auckland, New Zealand

Published by Wendy Pye Publishing Limited for SPCA Education

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ISBN: 978-0-9951263-6-7

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Distributed in New Zealand by The SPCA
50 Westney Road, Mangere, Auckland 2022

Printed in China through Colorcraft Ltd, Hong Kong.

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Marine Life Matters



Chapter 1

I've got a letter!" shouted Briar.

"Still getting snail mail," scoffed Edwin, who was busy on his laptop.

Briar ignored him and opened the letter. A red plastic tag fell out onto the kitchen table. Briar recognised it immediately.



It was a tag off one of the nine helium balloons she had released on the beach at her ninth birthday party. Now she was almost 10.

"My birthday balloons," she shouted. "Someone has found one of the tags!"

The tag reminded her of the birthday party. Apart from the "ironing board incident", it had been a great day. The balloon release had been the most exciting part.

Dad was almost as excited as Briar.

"Those balloons were my idea," he said proudly. "I wanted to do it for your grandmother's birthday, but I couldn't afford that many balloons," he laughed. "What does the letter say?"



Briar pulled the letter from the envelope and began to read it aloud. Soon her excitement changed to horror.



January

Dear Briar,

I hope this letter doesn't spoil your birthday memories. I am a scientist researching the effect that plastic litter has on marine life. One of the horrible parts of my job is looking into the stomachs of dead marine animals that get washed up on our beaches.

I found this tag and a deflated balloon in the stomach of a dead leatherback turtle found on Ninety Mile Beach. Leatherback turtles are endangered. Your balloon tag was just one of more than one hundred pieces of plastic in the turtle. Often when marine animals get that much plastic inside them, they are unable to digest their real food and they die.

I am sure you never thought a birthday balloon could be a danger to marine life, but they can be. I find the best way to deal with the problem is to make people aware of it. That's why I am writing to you.

I wish you all the best for your tenth birthday. I thought this information might be useful if you are considering another balloon release.

Kind regards,

Taylor McGinty

Marine Wildlife Research Director

Briar was speechless. Dad read the letter while Edwin was searching the web to find more information on the subject.

“Turtles and other marine creatures mistake plastic products and balloons for food like jellyfish,” he said.

“That’s horrible,” said Briar. “We have to do something about it, right now!”

“We?” asked Edwin. “Like what?”

Briar looked thoughtful.

“I’ll tell you in the morning,” she said.



Chapter 2

The next morning Edwin was surprised by Briar's plan.

"I've been thinking about the poor turtles and the plastics problem all night," she said. "I've decided to have a birthday party at the beach."

"Isn't that what created the problem in the first place?" asked Edwin.

"This is going to be a different sort of party," said Briar. "No helium balloons, no ordinary balloons, no plastic bottles, no plastic knives and forks, no plastic straws, no plastic bags, no plastic packaging and NO presents."

"No presents?" gasped Edwin. "What kind of birthday party is that?"

"A perfect one for marine wildlife," said Briar. "Anyone can come to the party as long as they bring one thing – a bag of plastic rubbish they've collected off the beach."

"But the beach is three kilometres long," said Edwin. "You'll need hundreds of people to come. How are you going to do that?"

"That's your problem, web ninja," she smiled.



Chapter 3

Briar called Edwin “web ninja” because when it came to the internet, he could do anything. In two days he had created a website for the party. Briar and Dad were impressed.

“It’s called the 5Bs,” he said. “The 5Bs stand for Briar’s Big Beach Birthday Barbecue.”

The site invited people to the party. It explained why it was happening. It had information about how balloons and plastics affect marine wildlife. It also told the story of how Briar’s birthday balloon had ended up in the stomach of an endangered leatherback turtle hundreds of kilometres away.



“I like it,” said Briar. “But how will people find the website?”

“Social media,” said Edwin. “I’ve created an event on Facebook that we can share with all our friends and they can share with all their friends. They just tick a box to say if they are interested in coming. We’ll get a good idea of how many people are going to turn up.”

“That’s brilliant, web ninja!” said Briar.

“Yes,” agreed Edwin, “but for this plan to work, we need one other thing – a viral video clip. This will grab attention and make people laugh. We’ll add a link to our website so people can share it on social media.”

“But where are we going to find a video like that?” asked Briar.

“I’ve already got one,” said Edwin.

Briar looked excited until Edwin told her the video clip he wanted to use.

“No!” she said, “not the ironing board incident! Never, never, never!”



Chapter 4

Two days later, Briar looked at Edwin's screen.

"Only 37 people have looked at the 5Bs website, and only nine want to come to the party. How are we going to clear the beach of plastic with nine people? We need hundreds."

"I've got the 'Ironing Board Incident' video ready to post," said Edwin. "Dad's OK with it. All I need is your approval. I've got some cool slow-mo replays in there. I've put the web address on Dad's tummy as he's lying on his back with the wave receding. It's quite artistic."

"No," said Briar. "Never!"

"Marine life matters," said Edwin.

Briar took a deep breath.

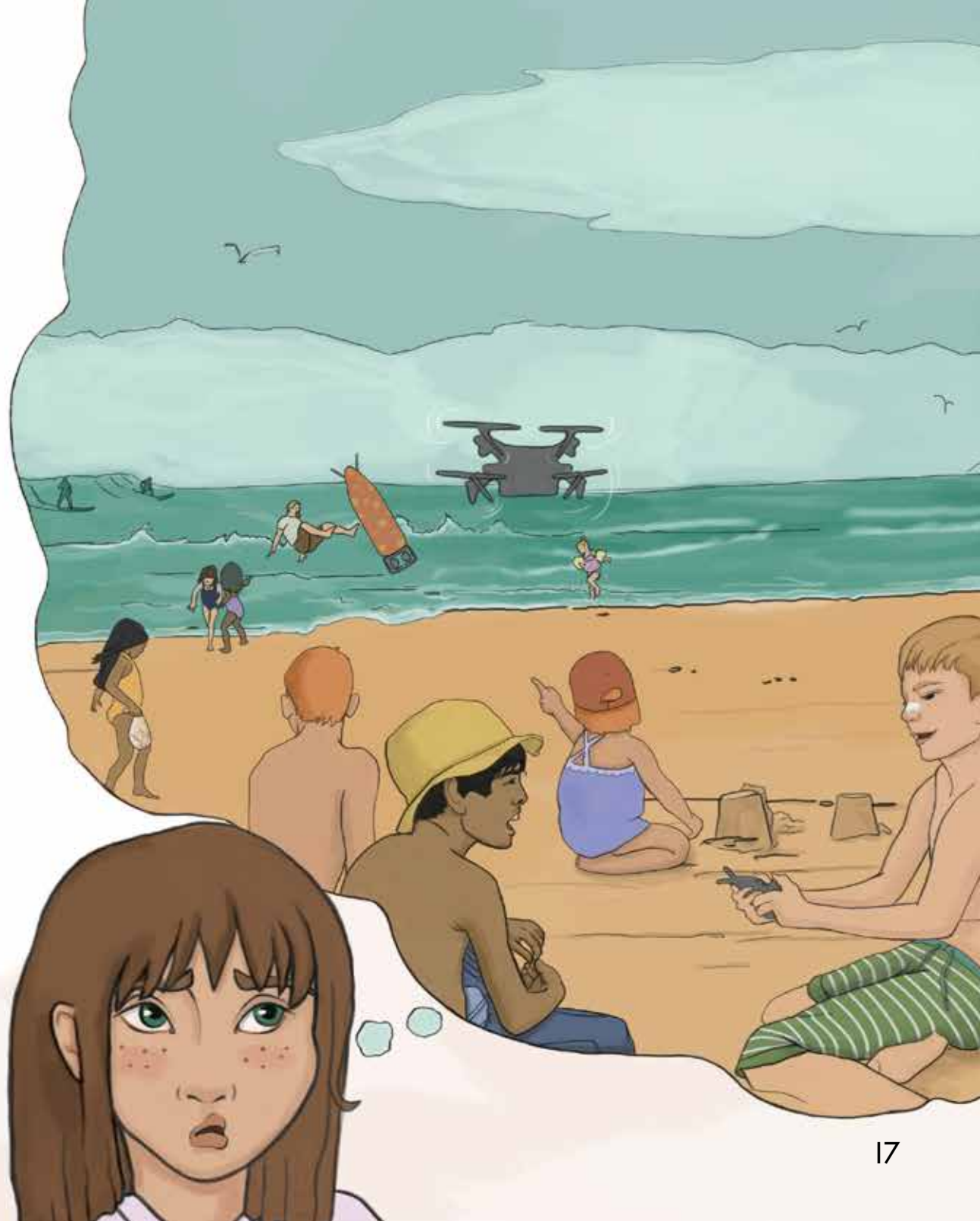
"OK," she said, "for marine life."



Briar remembered the incident well. It was Dad's silly idea to bring the ironing board to the beach to put the food on. After the food was eaten and the balloons were released, he had a sillier idea.

As a group of surfers strode towards the waves with their boards, Dad grabbed the ironing board, folded the legs and followed. Everyone on the beach was laughing except Briar and Edwin. Briar was embarrassed. Edwin was busy filming with his new drone.

The laughing got louder when Dad took the ironing board into the water. He lay on the board and pretended to paddle as a wave rushed up to the beach. He got to his feet and managed to strike a surfing pose. The people on the beach cheered and whistled as a wave broke and wedged the ironing board in the sand. Dad performed a front flip and landed on his back in the water.



Chapter 5

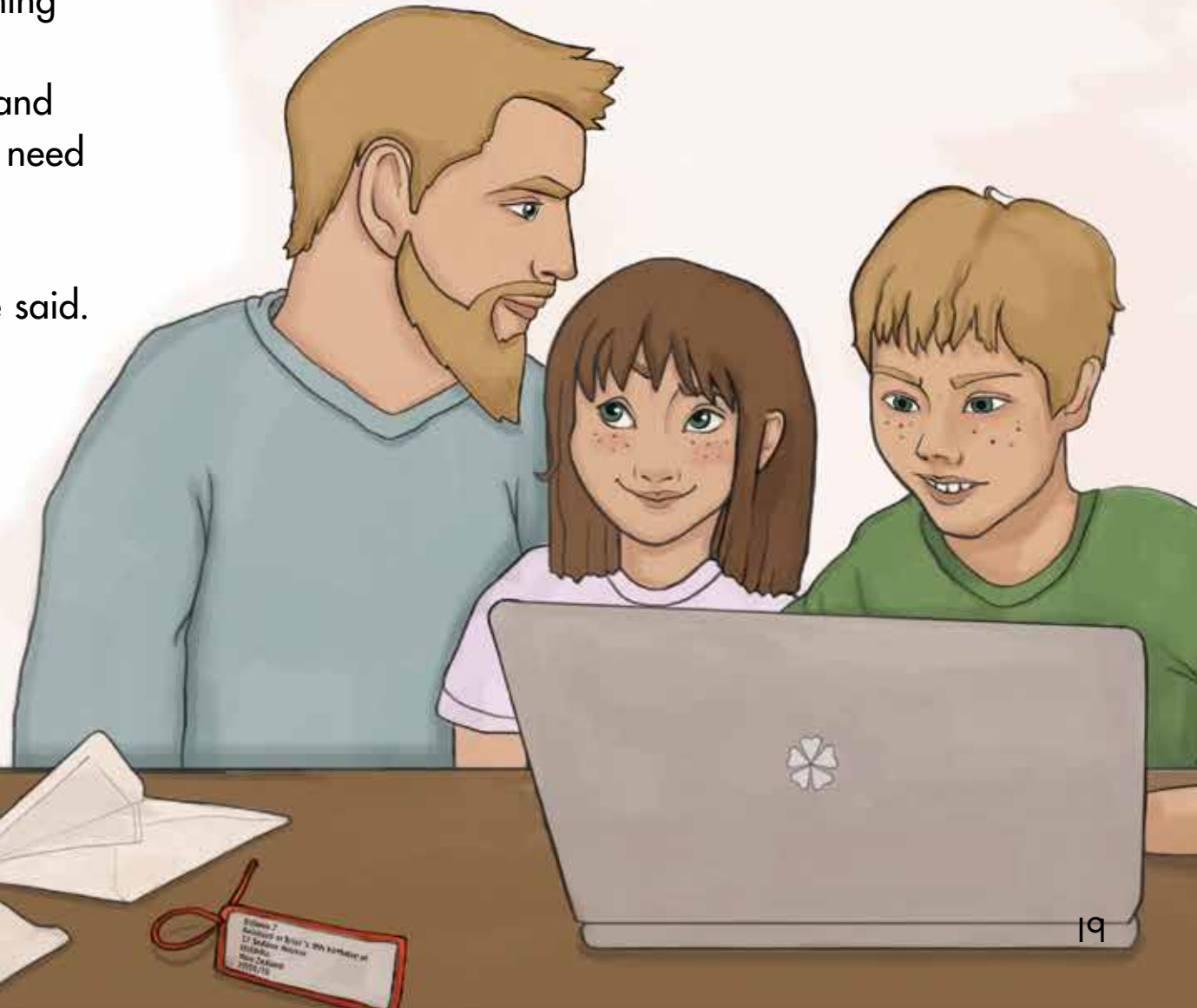
“Dad, we’ve had 24,900 views so far, you’re famous!” said Edwin. “We are getting support messages from all over the world.”

Dad was feeling flattered. Then Briar told him that over 300 people had said they were coming to the party.

“That’s hundreds of bags of plastic rubbish and hundreds of people to feed! We are going to need recycling bins and trailers and food,” he said.

“How are we going to manage that?”

Briar smiled. “You work for the council,” she said. “That’s your problem.”



Chapter 6

“My council is proud to support this plastic-free event,” said the mayor. “Thanks to your efforts and the inspiration of Briar and Edwin, this beach is now cleared of hundreds of pieces of plastic rubbish. The marine life here, and perhaps even hundreds of kilometres away, will be safer as a result. I think we should do this every year.”

Edwin and Briar were as proud as they were busy. They were helping Dad on the barbecue team when the mayor came over. She had an ironing board and a smile on her face. She propped the ironing board against the table.

“I understand there are people here who want to see you perform the art of ironing board surfing,” she said. People nearby cheered and clapped.

Dad remembered his sore back from the last time. “No!” he said. “Never never never!”

“Come on Dad,” said Briar, “marine life matters.”



Chapter 7

Briar opened the letter. She hoped it didn't have a balloon tag in it. She read it slowly.



February

Dear Briar,

Happy birthday for last Saturday. I saw you on the news. What a fantastic effort! It was great to see so many people celebrating a birthday without a balloon in sight.

Congratulations on getting the plastic off your beach. Congratulations also to your brother for creating the 5Bs website and to your Dad for making it so popular. You are truly helping to solve a serious problem by making more people aware of it and encouraging them to take action to fix it.

Kind regards,

Taylor McGinty

Marine Wildlife Research Director

P.S. I haven't seen any dead turtles on the beach lately, but I have seen several people taking ironing boards into the waves.

Sea Turtle Facts and Tips

Help protect precious sea turtles by sharing these facts and tips with all your friends, family, classmates and teachers.

- Sea turtles are air-breathing reptiles that live their entire life in the ocean. The only time they leave the water is when females come back to the beach where they were hatched to lay their own eggs.
- Sea turtle eggs are buried deep in the sand. The temperature of the sand affects whether eggs will develop to be male or female turtles.
- Rising sea levels are leading to the loss of sandy beach habitat for nesting sites. Increasing sand temperatures caused by warmer weather is impacting the percentage of male and female hatchlings from nests.
- After 45 to 70 days (depending on the species), baby turtles begin to break out of their eggs using a small temporary tooth located on their snout called a caruncle.
- An important action to protect turtles is to protect their environment. You can help by participating in beach clean-up events, always disposing of your rubbish responsibly and making a commitment to recycle or use re-usable materials.
- Sea turtles are protected under the Wildlife Act 1953. If you ever find one stranded or injured, call the Department of Conservation on 0800 362 468. They will tell you what to do.

Visit kids.spcaeducation.org.nz to learn more about caring for wildlife.