

How long does it take to disappear?

Beach debris can also be classified by its longevity. This classification does not require a key, just a timeline or graph. The list below includes a number of items that may be part of a Coastweeks collection on a beach. If left uncollected, how long would each item last?

Answers

(Fastest to slowest decomposition. Figures from Ohio Department of Natural Resources, 1988)

lettuce	1-2 weeks
paper	2-4 weeks
cotton	1-5 months
unpainted wood	1-4 years
painted wood	10-13 years
tin can	100 years
aluminum can	200-500 years
6-pack ring	about 450 years
plastic bottle	500-1000 years or more
glass	over 2000 years

PROCEDURE

1. With your group, examine the list of items below, considering that they may have been found on a beach. Decide as a group which will decompose the fastest and slowest, and arrange the items in order of fastest to slowest decomposition. Check your answers with the teacher.

ITEMS ON THE BEACH:

piece of paper	plastic bottle
aluminum can	cotton rag
piece of lettuce	glass bottle
unpainted wooden fence post	tin can
painted wooden fence post	plastic 6-pack ring

2. People learn in different ways, and many will remember a picture longer than they will the words about the picture. Take a strip of adding machine tape and cut a strip 100 feet long to represent relative decomposition time of the debris on the list. Cut out pictures of debris from magazines, or draw the pictures, and arrange the items along the strip to represent your idea of how long the things would last on the beach. If you wish, the strip can be marked off in time increments. Pictures of other items actually found on the beach can be added.
3. Design another way to illustrate how long the beach debris will last, and a way to reach the people who need to know this information.