Beach Wrack Life

A major component of wrack is Sargassum algae. This seaweed floats at sea and is part of a diverse assemblage of marine life adrift on the ocean's surface.

Currents transport Sargassum and other floating material, and onshore winds push it onto beaches. Storms can create rough surf that also brings sunken items ashore.

As wrack ages, it provides for the growth of fungi and other organisms.

Beetles, beach-hoppers, ghost crabs, and other small animals feed on the fungi growing in the wrack, as well as on the marine creatures that wash ashore after living lives at sea.

The smaller animals in the wrack provide food for shorebirds, which rely on this sustenance to fuel their long-distance migrations.

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The Dunlin's Journey
A Mega-marathon Fueled by Snacks from the Wrack
Dunlin sandpipers (below) often migrate over 6000 miles each year between their feeding and breeding areas. On their journey, the birds depend on pit stops where wrack and other food sources provide refueling energy. Without these options, the birds can starve to death.

Although most wrack clumps and the plants they foster disappear with time, some clumps grow into low dunes out on the upper beach. If left undisturbed, these small dunes can grow into substantial mounds capable of protecting upland property from storm erosion.

You Can Help
Mechanized removal of beach wrack is often aimed at removing the human litter we leave behind. Most of this could be picked up by hand. Freeing beaches of plastic debris reduces threats to wildlife from mistaken ingestion and entanglement, and abates the temptation to tidy the beach by more heavy-handed means. When you visit the beach, bring a re-used shopping bag to fill with the litter you find.

What's in the Wrack?
Hidden in the wrack are many items that take part in the wrack community and that have their own interesting stories to tell. Sea beans drift from the tropics, dune plant seeds give rise to future beach plants, and sea shells along with other invertebrate skeletons reveal former lives lived at sea. Human influence is also seen in the form of seaglass shards polished by the sea, and in bits of plastic from marine litter.

The wrack is stuff cast ashore by the sea. Much of this once grew in the sea, like seaweeds and seagrasses. These marine castaways foster protective dunes and allow assembly of a unique natural community that brings life to the beach.

Base of the Wrack Community
Most energy for the wrack community comes from a variety of marine plants. In their death, these plants form the base of a widely influential food web.

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