

It's No Game ...

By Mike Trippitt

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LET'S START WITH a party game. First, find a robust elastic band. Hook it over your thumb, stretch it around the back of your hand and hook the other end over your little finger, as shown in the photograph. Without using the other hand, or anything else, try to remove the band in under one minute.

Whilst we're having hours of fun doing that, did you know that there is a seal sanctuary just 20 miles from St Ives?

It's run by a charity, and rescues over 60 seal pups each year: Georgina Shannon, marketing executive at the sanctuary says that seal pups need assistance for all sorts of reasons, from malnourishment to serious injury. But entanglement in, or ingestion of discarded plastic is a major issue.

"Plastic pollution is a huge problem for all wildlife," says Georgina. "We have seen first hand the effects it has on seals. We try to communicate the importance of reducing plastic pollution and how to take care of wildlife with each and every one of our guests. Our seals are the ambassadors for that message."

I confess that the sanctuary I'm talking about is 20 miles outside St Ives in Cornwall: The Cornish Seal Sanctuary at Gweek has been rescuing seal since 1975. So apart from the tenuous link to our town's namesake, what has it to do with us?

The global movement to clean up our oceans and remove plastic waste from our shores gathered worldwide momentum after David Attenborough's Blue Planet II series, but last summer I was reminded that part of the solution is right here on our doorstep.

On several occasions throughout the year the banks of the River Ouse on Hemingford Meadow, Noble's Field and the meadows upstream of St Ives

lock are strewn with discarded bottles and a miscellany of plastic detritus. Some is abandoned in situ by riparian users, some drifts downstream in the gentle current. But when the meadows flood, it is destined to float down the Bedford drain out to sea.

At least one local couple takes a bin liner as well as a 'poo bag' on their daily dog walk.

They collect rubbish as they walk the meadows, leaving the place better than when they arrived. It takes no time and little effort.

So as spring approaches, consider the fun party game that we've been enjoying whilst reading this. It's called 'The Rubber Band Challenge' and it is a big part of the Cornish Seal Sanctuary's message

highlighting the harm caused to marine and aquatic life by plastic. The difficulty getting out of the rubber band is similar to the difficulty a seal has getting out of a plastic net, plastic bag, plastic fishing line, or a six-pack beer can ring.

The injuries caused to seals, birds and other marine mammals by plastic can be horrendous, and it is a misconception that such animals are miles from us and unaffected by what we do here. Our river is home

to a plethora of wildlife, including a seal population. It needs and deserves our protection. We can help by taking our litter home, picking others' litter up and making our riverside meadows better than when we arrived.

For the seals and birds of the Wash and The Ouse having plastic around their necks is no game.

