

The Little Choices That Changed the Shore

A Dunehopper Story About Marine Debris



Outer Banks, North Carolina

Forward

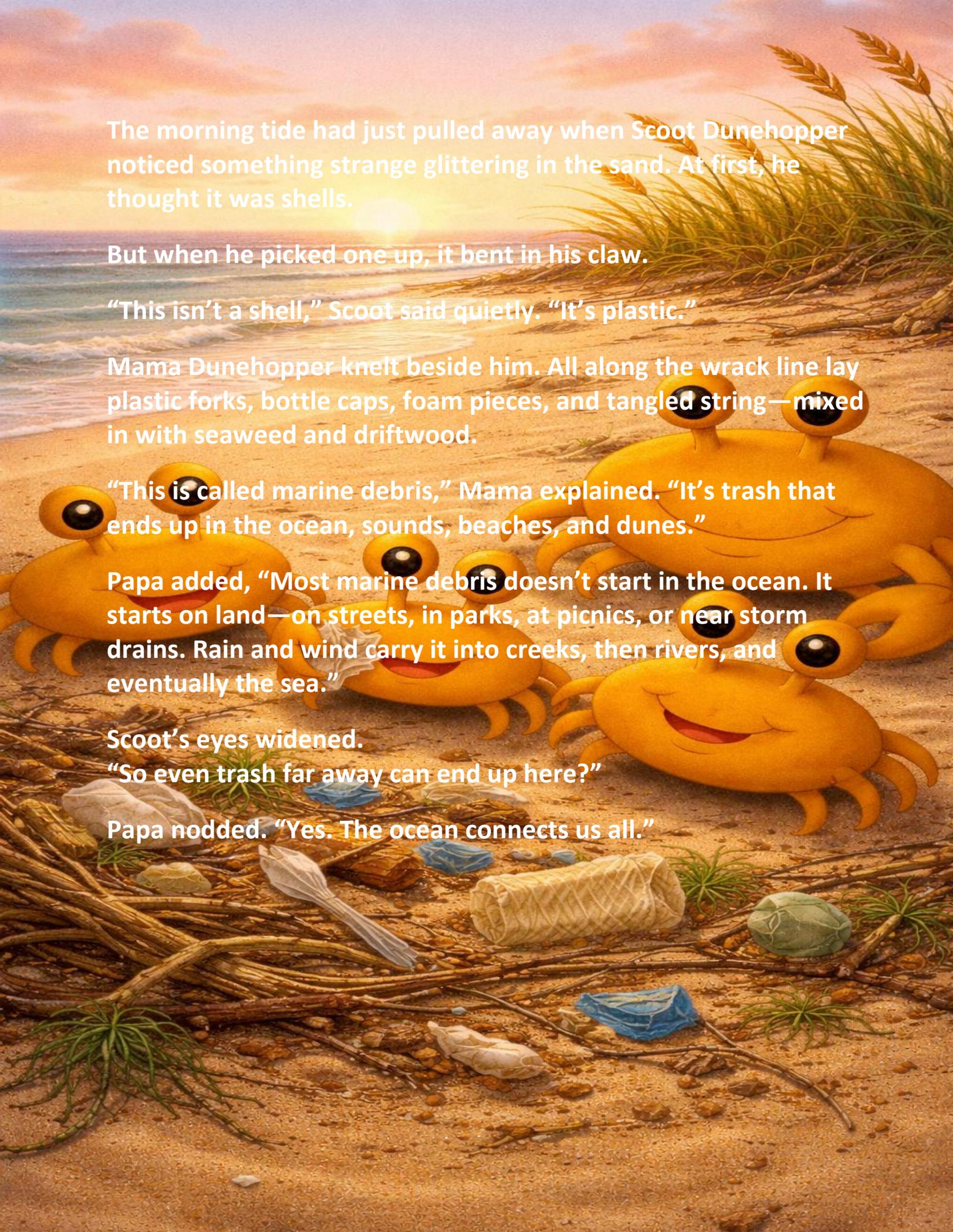
This storybook was created by the Outer Banks Coastal Conservation (OBCC), a nonprofit organization whose mission is to foster environmental stewardship and a deeper connection to the Outer Banks of North Carolina through outreach, education, and conservation efforts.

We believe that small stories can spark big change. That is why we have made this book available as a free resource for parents, teachers, and community members.

All materials in this book may be freely downloaded, shared, printed and used for educational or nonprofit purposes.

To learn more, access additional resources at: www.theobcc.org.





The morning tide had just pulled away when Scoot Dunehopper noticed something strange glittering in the sand. At first, he thought it was shells.

But when he picked one up, it bent in his claw.

“This isn’t a shell,” Scoot said quietly. “It’s plastic.”

Mama Dunehopper knelt beside him. All along the wrack line lay plastic forks, bottle caps, foam pieces, and tangled string—mixed in with seaweed and driftwood.

“This is called marine debris,” Mama explained. “It’s trash that ends up in the ocean, sounds, beaches, and dunes.”

Papa added, “Most marine debris doesn’t start in the ocean. It starts on land—on streets, in parks, at picnics, or near storm drains. Rain and wind carry it into creeks, then rivers, and eventually the sea.”

Scoot’s eyes widened.

“So even trash far away can end up here?”

Papa nodded. “Yes. The ocean connects us all.”

How Marine Debris Hurts Ocean Life

As they walked farther, Sandy pointed toward the water.
“Look—there’s fishing line tangled around that shell!”

Mama’s voice softened. “Marine debris can be very dangerous.
Animals can mistake plastic for food, or get trapped in it.”

She explained that:

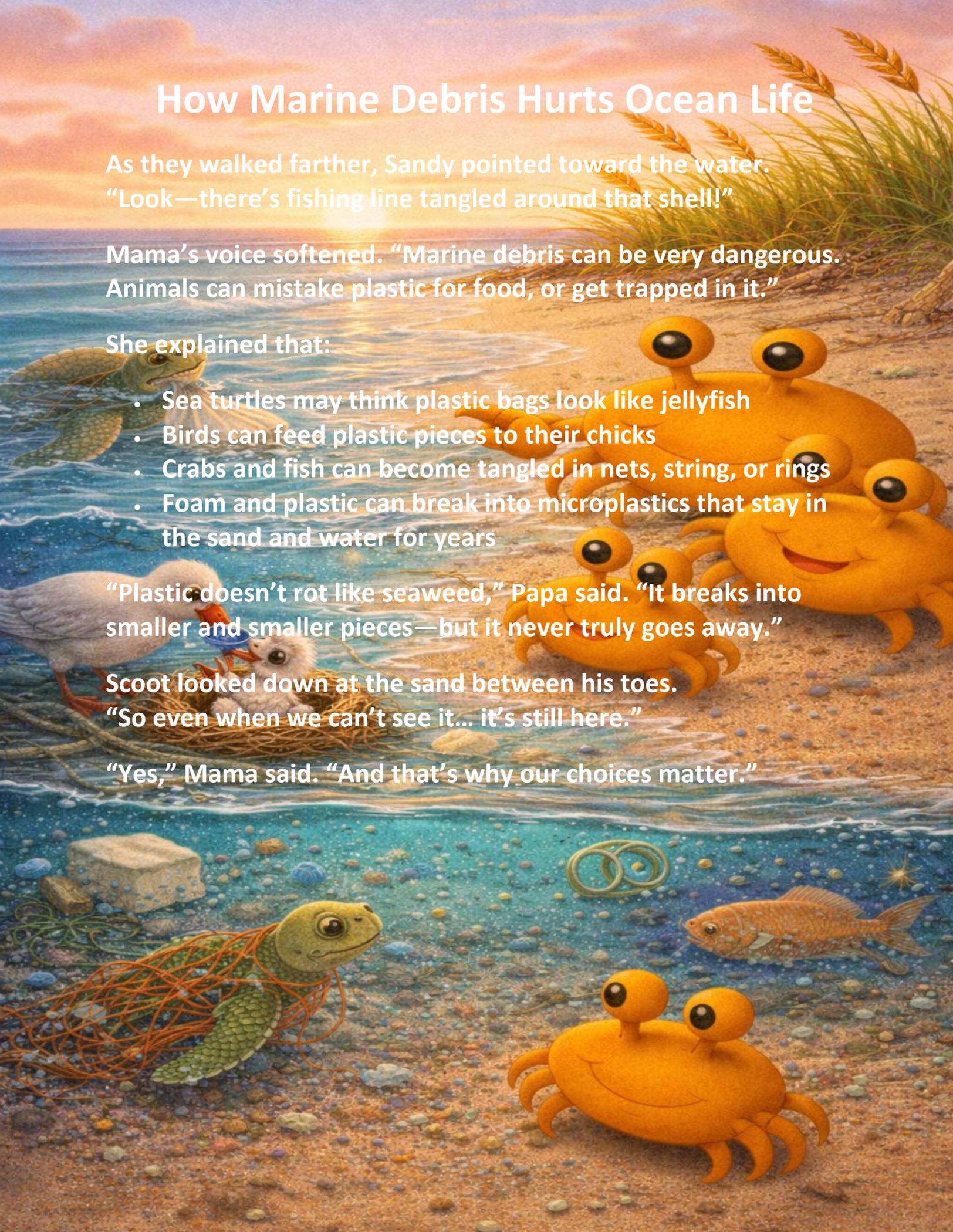
- Sea turtles may think plastic bags look like jellyfish
- Birds can feed plastic pieces to their chicks
- Crabs and fish can become tangled in nets, string, or rings
- Foam and plastic can break into microplastics that stay in the sand and water for years

“Plastic doesn’t rot like seaweed,” Papa said. “It breaks into smaller and smaller pieces—but it never truly goes away.”

Scout looked down at the sand between his toes.

“So even when we can’t see it... it’s still here.”

“Yes,” Mama said. “And that’s why our choices matter.”



Leading by Example at Home

Back at the burrow, the Dunehoppers made a family plan.

“No more single-use plastics when we can avoid them,” Papa declared.

They packed away plastic forks and foam cups and replaced them with:

- Metal utensils
- Ceramic plates
- Glass and stainless steel bottles

Mama filled the bottles with cool, filtered tap water.

“This saves money,” she said, “and keeps plastic bottles out of the ocean.”



Teaching Others About Marine Debris

At Sea Oats School, Professor Moontide invited the Dunehoppers to speak.

Scout stood in front of the auditorium with a bucket of beach finds. "This fork was used once," he said. "But it could last in the ocean for hundreds of years."

Sandy added, "Marine debris can come from picnics, boats, fishing gear, construction foam, and even tiny things like bottle caps and wrappers."

Mama reminded everyone, "When trash is put in the right bin—or reused instead—it never becomes marine debris at all."

After the lesson, the Dunehoppers shared reusable water bottles and bags.

"When you put better choices in people's claws," Papa said, "it's easier for them to help."



Cleaning Up and Speaking Up

That weekend, the Dunehoppers joined a beach cleanup. They found debris buried in sand, caught in dune grass, and floating near the shoreline.

Scout noticed something important.

“Even when we clean up,” he said, “more trash can come later.”

“That’s why cleanup is only part of the solution,” Papa replied. “We also have to prevent marine debris before it reaches the water.”

They began:

- Supporting organizations that remove debris from oceans
- Buying products with less packaging
- Choosing items made from recycled materials
- Buying local food instead of plastic-wrapped items shipped from far away



Mama helped the children write letters to companies.
“If businesses change their packaging,” she said, “less plastic reaches the sea.”

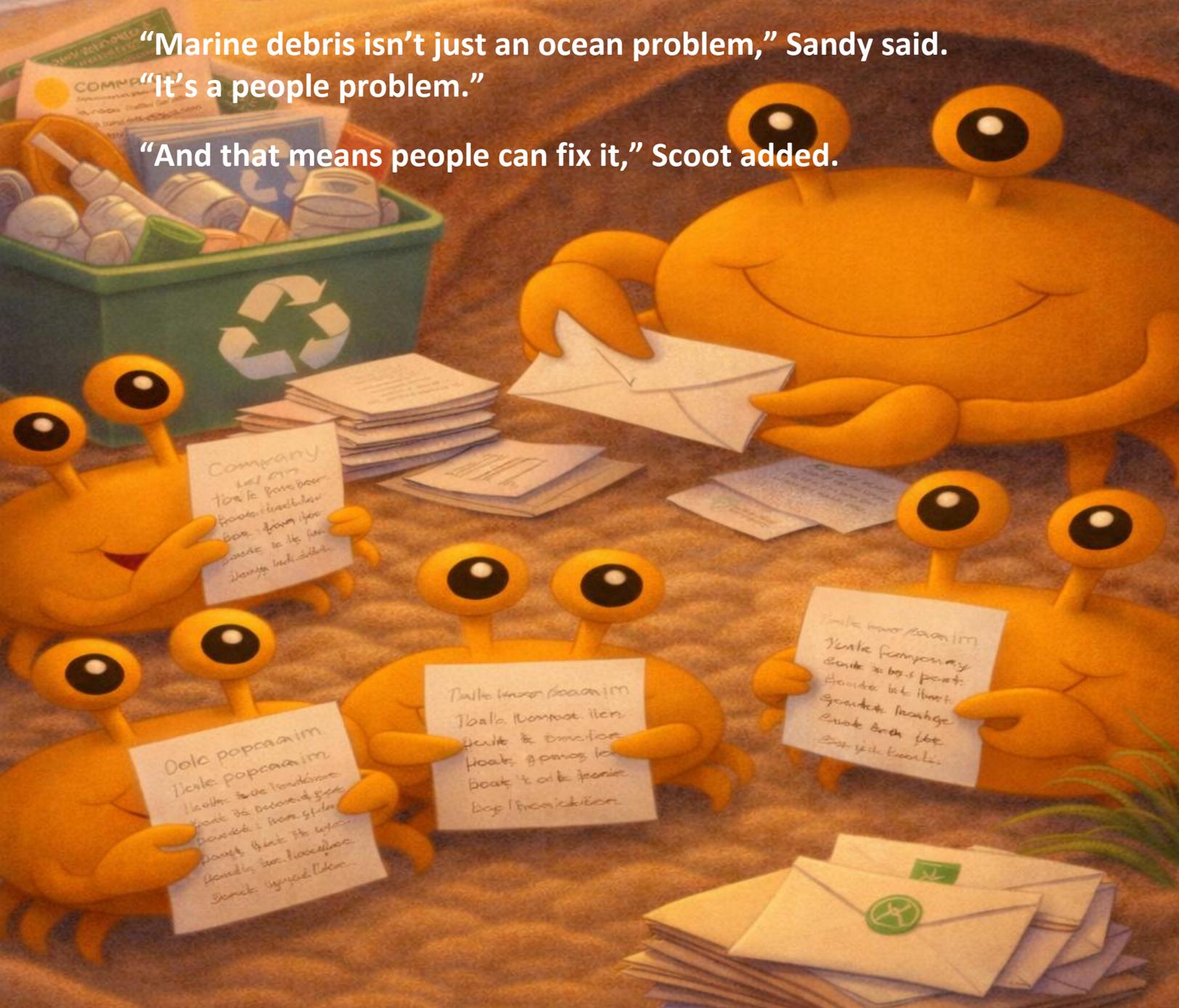
They also learned that communities and governments can help by:

- Improving waste systems
- Protecting waterways
- Supporting smart environmental policies

“Marine debris isn’t just an ocean problem,” Sandy said.

“It’s a people problem.”

“And that means people can fix it,” Scoot added.



A Cleaner Shore, One Choice at a Time

As the sun set, the beach looked calmer. Not perfect—but better.

Papa pressed his claw into the sand.

“When we lead by example, teach others, clean up together, and speak up for change,” he said, “we protect the shore before trash ever reaches the tide.”

Scout watched the waves shimmer.

“Marine debris starts with one careless moment,” he said softly.

“But it can end with many careful choices.”

The ocean hummed gently, and the Dunehoppers knew—even small crabs can help keep big waters clean.



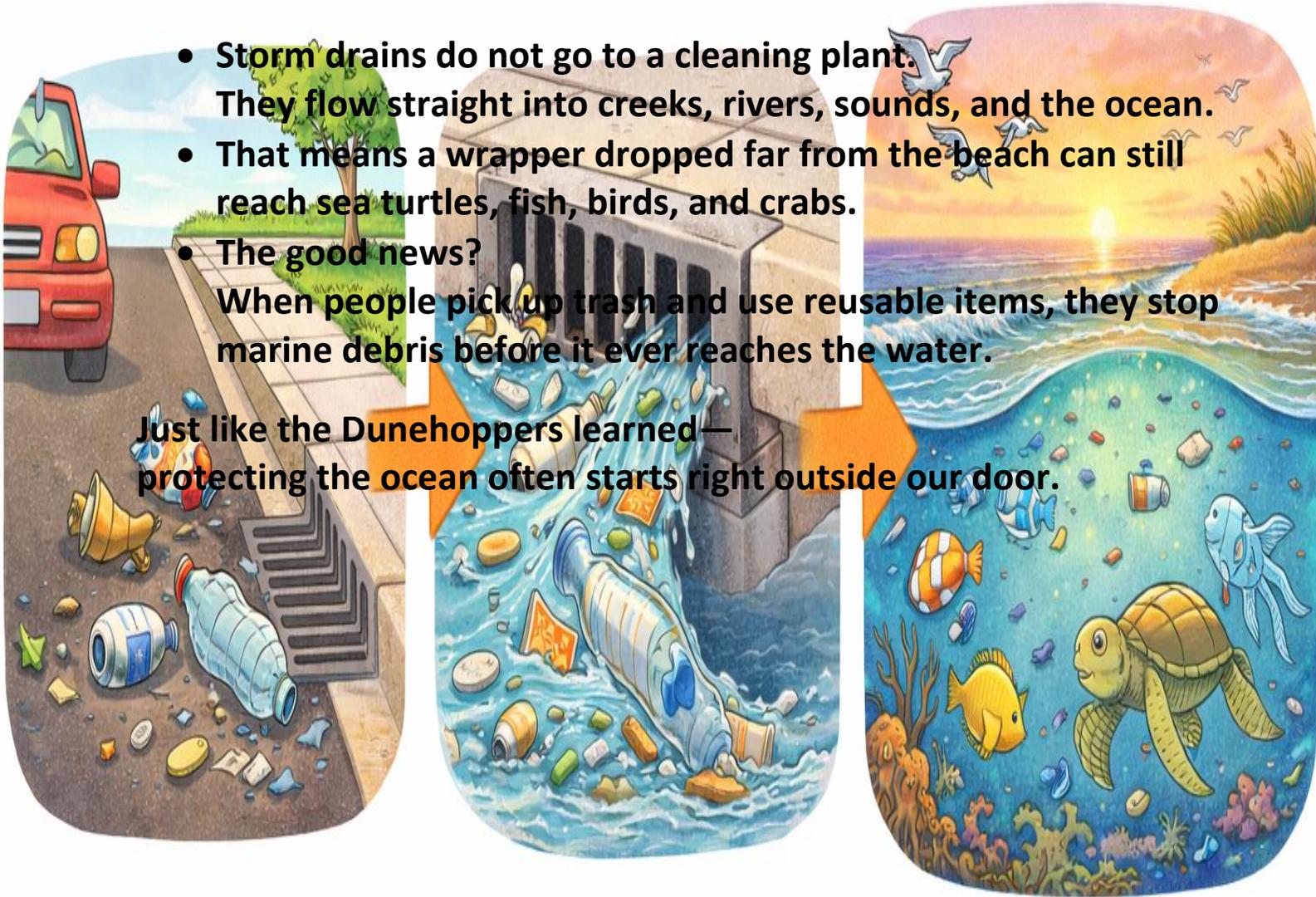
Did You Know?

Trash left on the street doesn't stay there.

When it rains, water washes litter into storm drains.

- Storm drains do not go to a cleaning plant. They flow straight into creeks, rivers, sounds, and the ocean.
- That means a wrapper dropped far from the beach can still reach sea turtles, fish, birds, and crabs.
- The good news? When people pick up trash and use reusable items, they stop marine debris before it ever reaches the water.

Just like the Dunehoppers learned—protecting the ocean often starts right outside our door.



Street → Storm Drain → Ocean