



Participants in the 38th Annual International Coastal Cleanup carry a fishnet to a boat on a coast near Sitka in August. (Ryan Morse / Sitka Conservation Society)

CAPITAL CITY WEEKLY

Resilient Peoples and Place: Coastal cleanup removes 1,400 lbs. of trash from Sitka's beaches

Effort by wide range of groups part of global project that has collected 350 million lbs. of waste.

By Lisa Teas Conaway

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The boat pulls right up to the black sand beach dotted with driftwood and volcanic pumice stones, and our large fellowship disembarks. Our boots sink into the sand as we line up to receive our gear for the day: gloves, repurposed gl  acks, small knives and bear spray.

We stand in the shadow of L'ux, a stratovolcano also known as Mt. Edgecumbe. Kruzof Island, the land of the Kiks.ádi since time immemorial, is a remote island approximately 14 miles from Sheet'ká or Sitka where we started from. There are over 40 of us from many different backgrounds, united by a common goal of trying to make the world a cleaner and healthier place. I latch my knife to my belt, pull on my gloves and follow the group along the shore, we start to spread out in our search for garbage.



More than 40 volunteers from a range of organizations including congressional members, tribal governments, environmental organizations, visiting social media influencers and more worked side-by-side removing 1,400 pounds of trash from coasts near Sitka in August. (Ryan Morse / Sitka Conservation Society)

Slowly I walk through beach grass so tall it tickles my ribs while peering between the fronds in search of anything unnatural. Fishing net, bottles, an old glass ball, perhaps; I find a broken piece of styrofoam, pick it up and put it in my grain sack. Again and again, more styrofoam, bits of plastic, a lone shoe, tangled fishing line. This remote and beautiful place is revealing its heavy burden to us, and our bags grow heavier and heavier. I pick up a small plastic arm fallen from a toy soldier and call out to the person next to me, with the Clean Swell app pulled up on their phone: “What category would this fall



We track everything gathered on this app that provides important data to help scientists and advocates tackling our global plastics problem. According to a study by the World Economic Forum, a dump truck load of garbage finds its way into our oceans every minute through city runoff, cargo losses, tsunami events, lost fishing gear and other avenues. After what I saw on this beach, I believe them.

I pass people pulling rope out from under logs, finding styrofoam half-covered with moss, even a group of five working diligently, knives in hand, dividing a massive piece of trawl net so it can be carried back to our pickup sight. It's hard not to be discouraged by the sheer amount of trash we found, but watching such a diverse group of people from congressional members, tribal governments, environmental organizations, visiting social media influencers, and volunteers working side by side gives a feeling of camaraderie.





He  ske from the Center for Alaskan Coastal Studies hauls a tangled web of fishing gear and plastic across volcanic rocks. (Ryan Morse / Sitka Conservation Society)

This is the kickstart to the 38th annual International Coastal Cleanup, co-hosted by the Ocean Conservancy and Sitka Sound Science Center. The Ocean Conservancy started organizing these cleanups across 150 different countries and, since its inception in 1986, over 350 million pounds of trash have been collected. The Sitka Sound Science Center has its own marine debris program, spearheaded by Zofia Danielson, which has helped to eliminate over 1.7 million pounds of debris from remote beaches across Alaska since 2008 — that's equivalent to three Boeing 747 airplanes.

The group of participants represented an impressive diversity of people and partners including U.S. Sen. Dan Sullivan's office, the Central Council of the Tlingit and Haida Indian Tribes of Alaska, Seacoast Indigenous Guardians Network, Sustainable Southeast Partnership, Marine Debris-Center for Alaskans, Sitka Tribe of Alaska, Takshanuk Watershed Council, Alaska Sea Grant, Sitka Conservation Society, Northern Southeast Regional Aquaculture Association, City of Sitka, Alaska Longline Fisherman's Association, Sitka Trail Works, University of Alaska Southeast, Center for Alaskan Coastal Studies, Aleut Community of St. Paul Island, NOAA Marine Debris Program, United States Coast Guard, and volunteers, as well as popular influencers Caulin Donaldson (@TrashCaulin) and Heather Kootink Douville (@Akmoosie).

We are working together to not only clean up the beaches, but also educate people and, encourage others to make a difference in their own communities by cleaning up and saying no to single-use plastics

In Sheet'ká, we stand on Lingít Aaní – Lingít land. Heather Kootink Douville of the Lingít Shank'weidi wolf clan and regional resource coordinator with Seacoast Indigenous Guardians Network heaves a bag full of debris over her shoulder and a wide smile spreads across her face.





The kickoff of the 38th Annual International Coastal Cleanup began on the volcanic beaches at the base of L'ux, a stratovolcano also known as Mt. Edgecumbe on Kruzof Island, 14 miles from Sitka in August. (Ryan Morse / Sitka Conservation Society)

“We are committed to preserving our homelands for all living beings, including animals, birds, and marine life. These lands hold a sacred significance, and as stewards, we all share the responsibility of their care. Even in less frequented places, our duty to safeguard them remains unwavering,” she said.

Heather is part of the recently formed Seacoast Indigenous Guardians Network (SIGN) which has been under development for the past few years originating through a partnership between Tlingit and Haida Native Lands and Resources Division and the USDA Forest Service in recognition of the tribal government’s inherent sovereignty. SIGN has many goals and a growing list of community partners (www.SeacoastIGN.org).

Not only do they aim to help Southeast Alaska tribes strengthen their communities through youth programs and job opportunities, but also with Indigenous-led stewardship of natural resources — because taking care of the lands and oceans is taking care of the people.



Ralph Góos'k' Wolfe of the Eagle Frog Kooskadee clan is the Director of Indigenous Stewardship Programs with SIGN. He pauses in his efforts to extract trawl net that has become entangled in the bank: "It's good to see people taking care of the land, that's what we always talk about, and it's good to get out here and remind ourselves why we do what we do and why we're trying to build up this network of people to collaborate together and do things like this more often; take care of our resources, take care of our lands."



Chuck Daanaxh.ils'eikh Miller, cultural and community liaison for Sitka Tribe of Alaska, and Heather Kootink Douville, regional resource coordinator for Seacoast Indigenous Guardians Network, work together to dislodge a tangle of fishing line from beach logs. (Ryan Morse / Sitka Conservation Society)

Rain washes the sweat from our brows as our time at the base of L'ux comes to an end, but no one is complaining, there is nothing but smiling faces all around. We cleared 800 to 900 pounds of man-made debris from this one stretch of coastline and have left it slightly better than when we came. The deep feeling of a job well done washes over the group after all the debris has been packed, bag by bag, on and off of the boat, up the gangway, and into waiting trucks before heading to Sitka's waste management facility. Something Chuck Daanaxh.ils'eikh Miller of the Raven Coho Clan, cultural and community liaison for Sitka Tribe of Alaska told the group earlier is running



through my mind: “Khaa yáa awuné means respect, respect for yourself, people around you, the environment, and things like that, so that’s what we’re doing, we’re showing respect today.”

Our group mobilized the very next day again bright and early down at the docks to find our next beach to clean. Though fewer in number, we held just as much spirit and excitement as the day before. Bundled up and packed up, we boarded our boats and sped across the eastern channel, south of Sheet’ká towards Watsíxh, or Biorka Island, home to the Kiks.ádi Raven Frog clan.

The wind whipped our hair and stung our cheeks as Watsíxh came into sight. Like Kruzof, Biorka sits right on the edge of the gulf and is hit with a torrent of waves laced with marine debris daily. After offloading and gearing up, we hike a quarter mile through undergrowth and muskeg before reaching Back Beach. We descend onto the log and boulder beach, our mission to extract as much garbage as we can. People pulled at nets and ropes and cut them out of log jams. Our bags grew heavy and our hearts light as we dug deeper into the tangle of netting on the plastic-encrusted bank.



Zofia Danielson, marine debris coordinator with Sitka Sound Science Center, works alongside Michael LaVine, senior director of Alaska programs with Ocean Conservancy, to portion up a large piece of trawl net carried back to the pickup site. (Ryan Morse / Sitka Conservation Society)



I worked alongside Tracy Wirak-Cassidy from the Takshanuk Watershed Council to free a massive tangle of ropes from the logs. For nearly an hour we shift logs and cut at the line, our knives actively dulling with each swipe. Finally, it's free. It takes both of us to carry and drag it to the pickup location, looking as though we were wrestling some kind of strange pale blue python across the granite boulders. Davey Lubin, captain of the Esther G Sea Taxi, one of our boat escorts for the trip, met us on Back Beach and deployed rubber rafts to help load debris straight to his boat, saving us from the prospect of hiking back across the island with it all. We collect too much for his boat to carry, what we can't pack back with us we resolve to leave in a large super sack above the high tide line to be retrieved another day.

It's devastating to see the amount of small pieces of plastics littering even our remote coastlines. As I pull out a plastic bottle half-buried in sand all I see are small angular pieces of brightly colored plastics with sand fleas or beach hoppers jumping about. We could not collect all the debris off this one beach in the time allotted, but we did collect 600 to 700 pounds, making our grand total for the two days over 1,400 pounds of trash taken off the beaches.

Events like these are hugely important in shedding light on this global issue.

"It's hard to do cleanups here, and it's hard to get to the beaches that need the most help, because those beaches are often the ones that are the most exposed," explains Kristina Tirman, Arctic marine debris program coordinator for Ocean Conservancy. "So you can imagine that the reason that they're covered in driftwood and garbage is because there are waves that are crashing, and all these other factors that...lead to marine debris being there also lead to those beaches being difficult to access."

After seeing the overwhelming amounts of plastics littering beaches miles away from the nearest town, I know I will think twice when encountering it in my future. Our planet's ecosystem is suffering under the weight of our plastics problem, left unchecked our global plastic production is projected to reach 1.6 billion tons per annum by 2050 according to "Modeling plastics use and waste in a CGE: Methodology and baseline projections to 2060" by the Global Trade Analysis Project in 2022.



There are many roads to a solution for our global plastic problem from the individual level all the way to the national and global; if we pursue them collectively we can work towards improving the delicate balance of our global ecosystem. Simple things like opting out of single-use plastics, by carrying water bottles and reusable shopping bags can greatly reduce the amount of trash entering our oceans. Within our cities we can [research](#) better waste management and recycling options. Individuals are also welcome to contact the Sitka Sound Science Center to get involved and volunteer at one of our many organized marine debris cleanups or plan your own. Anyone can download the Clean Swells app to record marine debris data in their area. Nationally our government recently signed the Ocean Climate Action Plan which includes items aimed at reducing aquatic pollution such as modernizing wastewater and stormwater systems that can directly reduce pollution runoff and the resulting damage. To find more ways to get involved visit [OceanConservancy.org](https://oceanconservancy.org).

• *Lisa Teas Conaway is a lifelong Sitkan with many childhood memories of hiking mountains and boating along the endless miles of coastlines in the area. She studied visual arts and English at the University of Alaska Southeast, Sitka campus. In 2023 she joined the Sitka Sound Science Center team as their communications coordinator developing stories and managing the nonprofit's online platforms. Lisa spends her free time painting and drawing when not out exploring with her husband and two young sons. Resilient Peoples & Place appears monthly in the Capital City Weekly.*

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