



The image shows three people working together to clean up marine debris. On the left, a person in a yellow and orange safety vest and a red and white cap stands near a pile of dry grass. In the center, a man in a grey hoodie and jeans is leaning over a large pile of tangled blue and green fishing nets. On the right, another man in a red jacket, orange safety vest, and black beanie is also working with the nets. The background is a cloudy sky.

# MARINE DEBRIS IN ALASKA:

WORKING TOGETHER TO KEEP OUR  
COASTS CLEAN AND HEALTHY



# THE MARINE DEBRIS PROBLEM

**Plastic pollution is now found in all corners of the world, from the sea surface to the seafloor and in the most distant reaches of the Arctic.**

In Alaska, marine debris accumulates in remote places, where it fouls beaches, harms wildlife, and affects community well-being. Rural people are left with the impacts, expense, and logistical challenges of cleaning up and disposing of this debris.

Through support for community and Tribal initiatives, data collection, education, and funding, we can work together to keep Alaskan coasts and communities healthy and clean from marine debris.

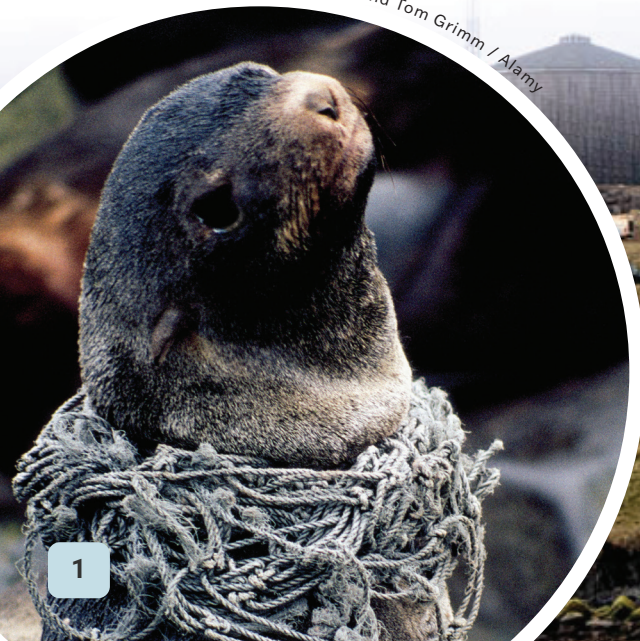


***“We see marine debris every day on our beaches. Fishing line, nets, and other gear impact the seals and birds that have been with us for generations. We value the commitment and willingness to support our marine debris cleanups that Ocean Conservancy has shown as a partner.”***

**Paviilax “Paul” Melovidov**

Island Sentinel Coordinator for Aleut Community of St. Paul Island

Photo: Michele and Tom Grimm / Alamy





Since 1986,  
**18 MILLION PEOPLE**  
around the world have rallied in  
their local communities to clean  
up beaches and waterways, Arctic  
regions included, through  
the International Coastal  
Cleanup.



Ocean Conservancy has nearly 40 years of experience in marine debris removal through the **International Coastal Cleanup®** (ICC). The ICC is a network model that is mobilizing hundreds of thousands of volunteers each year to clean beaches and waterways around the world. While doing so, they collect data and report findings to Ocean Conservancy's online, open database, TIDES, the largest global database on marine debris.

The vast coastline and distance between communities in Alaska make it uniquely challenging to address marine debris. Durable partnerships among communities, Tribes, NGOs, federal agencies, industry, and others are necessary.

Ocean Conservancy has sought to build equitable, strong collaborations across Alaska and the Arctic region to advance shared conservation goals. We are integrating the expertise of both the ICC and the Arctic Program in our work on marine debris issues in Alaska. Together, we are working to raise awareness of the issue and amplify our collective impact.

## #SEATHECHANGE

Ocean Conservancy is working with partners in Alaska and throughout the Arctic to build a collaborative approach to addressing the marine debris problem.





# ALASKA'S COASTS

## MARINE DEBRIS

A healthy ocean is central to life in Alaska. Coastal communities depend on the ocean for food, economic opportunity, cultural continuity, and other aspects of daily life.

Tribes have stewarded ocean resources in Alaska for millennia and continue to do so today. These ocean waters provide vital feeding and breeding habit for thousands of species of whales, birds, fish, and other iconic wildlife.

In Alaska, marine debris accumulates in vast quantities along remote beaches. It comes from a number of sources, including mismanaged waste, abandoned, lost or discarded fishing gear (also referred to as 'ghost gear'), and extreme weather events such as tsunamis and floods. Most of the debris that washes up on Alaskan shorelines is plastic.

Photo: Johnner Images / Alamy



Photo: Caitlin Blaisdell



Approximately  
**11 MILLION TONS**  
of plastic waste enter the  
ocean each year.



That will nearly triple to  
almost  
**30 MILLION TONS/YEAR**  
by 2040 if trends persist.

*"Coastal Alaska lives off what the ocean can provide. Whether that is commercial salmon, subsistence clams, recreational halibut, marine mammals, or tourism brought in by the natural beauty of this state, Alaskan communities depend on ocean resources. Marine debris on our coasts and in our waters, as it affects each of these and many more resources, deeply impacts lives across the entire state."*



**Henry Reiske**  
Marine Debris Coordinator,  
Center for Alaskan Coastal  
Studies, Homer, AK



More than  
**3 MILLION POUNDS  
OF DEBRIS**

— mostly plastic —

were removed during documented  
cleanup efforts in Alaska between  
2005-2014

**Removing marine debris  
from beaches in Alaska can  
be expensive, difficult, and  
dangerous.**

Vast distances, expense, and extreme  
conditions make removing debris  
particularly challenging in Alaska. Even when  
it can be removed from beaches, proper  
disposal can be expensive and difficult, and  
communities can be left with  
messes they did not create.

The below map depicts the  
generalized Gulf of Alaska storm  
track and prevailing ocean  
surface currents that transport  
and drive marine debris onto  
Alaska's shores.

Alaska has more than  
**44,000 MILES OF  
SHORELINE**

most of which is not connected  
to the road system and only  
accessible by boat,  
plane, or helicopter.





# WORKING TOGETHER

## PARTNERSHIPS

**Addressing marine debris in Alaska takes strong partnerships among communities, Tribes, local governments, nongovernmental organizations, industry, and others.**

Ocean Conservancy's support for community and Tribal-led cleanups is growing throughout Alaska and the Arctic region. Since 2021, together with our partners, we have supported over 100 cleanups in the region, involving 2,250 staff and volunteers who have removed more than 300,000 lbs of debris from beaches and waterways. These efforts are initiated and led by local partners, often with technical, funding, or other support from Ocean Conservancy.

## RESEARCH

Better understanding the scope and impacts of marine debris is necessary to craft solutions. Ocean Conservancy prioritizes the collection, maintenance, and evaluation of data from cleanups in Alaska and around the world. Our TIDES database includes information from nearly 40 years of cleanups. We also participate in and support scientific research, including investigating the prevalence of microplastics in the marine environment and food sources.



Photo: Bonnie Hamilton

## POLICY

Ultimately, we need to stop debris from reaching beaches. Doing so will require policy change efforts beyond Alaska. Ocean Conservancy is working with state and federal governments and in international forums to advance collaborative solutions. Our policy work focuses on reducing the most common single-use plastics that end up as marine debris and holding producers of plastics and packaging financially accountable for paying for the end-of-life of their products to build out better infrastructure and incentivize less wasteful packaging.



***“We are grateful for this partnership; through marine debris cleanup and education about prevention, we are working towards our mission to restore balance to the coastal communities and biodiverse ecosystems of Southeast Alaska. Every action taken today ensures that the ocean is protected for generations to come.”***

**Heather Kootink Douville**  
Senior Project Coordinator,  
Seacoast Indigenous Guardians Network



Photo: Whirled

## BACKHAUL

**One of the unique challenges in Alaska is disposing of debris once it is removed from beaches.**

Often, collected marine debris ends up sitting in communities because there is no viable way to dispose of or recycle it locally; nor is there funding available to transport debris to landfills or recycling centers.

Ocean Conservancy is working with partners to develop and fund a program to remove, transport, and recycle collected marine debris. A state-wide backhaul program can help rural communities and prevent collected debris from remaining on beaches, accumulating in landfills, or being burned.

## LOOKING AHEAD

Ocean Conservancy is excited to be supporting the development of a network of entities that collaborate to share information, support each other in cleanup efforts, and work to raise awareness and funding. Connecting communities – and creating opportunities for them to share resources, insights, and best practices – is a critical part of addressing the marine debris challenge in Alaska.







*"Alaska and the circumpolar Arctic are places of majesty, inhabited by Indigenous people for millennia, and home to congregations of fish, birds, and marine wildlife seen nowhere else on earth. Sustaining these healthy ecosystems and supporting the communities that depend on them in the face of rapid climate change and other threats is paramount. Removing and disposing of marine debris is one vital component of this work. I'm proud of our collaborations and am excited to be on the ground again supporting these efforts."*

**Janis Searles Jones**  
CEO - Ocean Conservancy



*Ocean Conservancy envisions a healthier ocean protected by a more just world. We are working to protect the ocean from today's greatest global challenges and, together with our partners, we create evidence-based solutions for a healthy ocean and the wildlife and communities that depend on it.*


## GET INVOLVED


- Visit our website to learn more:  
<https://oceanconservancy.org/arctic-marine-debris>
- Contact our cleanup team to find a cleanup near you:  
[cleanup@oceanconservancy.org](mailto:cleanup@oceanconservancy.org)
- Want to plan your own cleanup? Download the **Arctic Cleanup Toolkit and Data Card** to get started!



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 @OurOcean

 Ocean Conservancy



Scan the QR  
code to learn  
more about  
our Alaska and  
Arctic marine  
debris work.

