

The Marine Debris Research and Reduction Act of 2005

A Comprehensive Approach to Marine Debris

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The recently released U.S. Commission on Ocean Policy report, issued in September 2004, points out that drifting gear can damage fragile coral reefs, seagrass beds, and other critical habitat, and entangle marine wildlife.

A Needed Solution

Thanks to a growing awareness of the marine debris problem—brought on in part by the work of the International Coastal Cleanup—Senator Daniel Inouye of Hawaii recently introduced the Marine Debris Research and Reduction Act of 2005 into Congress this past February. The timely piece of legislation will help address the marine debris problem nationwide, particularly in Hawaii. Hawaii's ecosystems are hit harder by marine debris and derelict fishing gear problem than any other state. This is especially true for the Northwestern Hawaiian Islands, which are home to hundreds of miles of pristine coral reef and critical habitat for diverse fish and wildlife. Drifting, derelict fishing gear, floating all the way from the Northern Pacific, is a common sight in this remote, massive island chain.

Marine debris includes derelict fishing gear and nets from commercial fishing, as well as pervasive trash from land-based recreational activities. The recently released U.S. Commission on Ocean Policy report, issued in September 2004, paid great attention to marine debris of all kinds, and pointed out that drifting gear can damage fragile coral reefs, seagrass beds, and other critical habitat, and entangle marine wildlife. This adds greater stress to already-imperiled marine ecosystems, particularly in large coastal states like Florida, California, Alaska, and Hawaii.

Entangled Animals Worldwide (2004 ICC)

ENTANGLING DEBRIS						
	Invertebrates	Fishes	Reptiles	Birds	Mammals	Total
Balloon Ribbon/String	1			7	1	9 4.8%
Crab/Lobster/Fish Traps	7	1			1	9 4.8%
Fishing Line	20	38	2	23	5	88 47.3%
Fishing Nets	6	11		4		21 11.3%
Miscellaneous	9	4	3	1	2	19 10.2%
Plastic Bags	1		1	1	1	4 2.2%
Rope	8	8	1	5	8	30 16.1%
Six-Pack Holders				5		5 2.7%
Wire					1	1 0.5%
Total	52	62	7	46	19	186
Total Percentage	28.0%	33.3%	3.8%	24.7%	10.2%	

The Marine Debris Act represents a step forward in addressing marine debris, partly because it doesn't stop at debris removal. It also attempts to address the problem before debris even enters the water.

Number of Entangled Animals Found (2004)

Invertebrates	52
Fishes	62
Reptiles	7
Birds	46
Mammals	19
Animals Found in:	
balloon ribbon/string	9
rope	30
fishing line	88
fishing nets	21
crab/ lobster/fish traps	9
other	29

Removal And Prevention

The Marine Debris Act represents a step forward in addressing marine debris, partly because it doesn't stop at debris removal. It also attempts to address the problem before debris even enters the water, by:

- creating a prevention, monitoring, and removal program within NOAA;
- enhancing Coast Guard efforts at prevention and enforcement;
- improving coordination of different federal agencies; and
- establishing a federal information clearinghouse on marine debris.

These in-depth measures are just as important as cleaning up marine, because they attempt to address marine debris where it begins: people's actions. Says Seba Sheavly, Director of The Ocean Conservancy's International Coastal Cleanup, "The Act will expand the existing body of science, contribute to our understanding of its sources, and lead to more effective prevention."

In 2004, over 300,000 volunteers around the world removed over 7 million pounds of debris, with 3.7 million lifted from the U.S. alone. Thanks to Senator Inouye and the bill's co-sponsors Senators Stevens, (R-Alaska), Cantwell (D-Wash.), Snowe (R-Maine), Kerry (D-MA) and Lautenberg (D-N.J.) the Marine Debris Research and Reduction Act represents a huge step forward in the effort to protect and restore our ocean environment, and it demonstrates what is possible when individuals have the power to work for positive change.

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