



The MCA Foundation and Marine Debris in Alaska

# A Programmatic Response to Marine Pollution

**A threat is advancing on Alaska's coastline:** plastic bottles, food wrappers, fishing nets, line and buoys; sneakers, gloves, even bathtub toys. It's marine debris and has been called a "serious threat to fishery resources, wildlife, and habitat, as well as human health and safety," by the US Commission on Ocean Policy, a sentiment that was reinforced by the passage of the 2006 Marine Debris Research, Prevention, and Reduction Act.

Leading the fight against marine debris in Alaska is the MCA Foundation (MCAF). The non-profit arm of the Marine Conservation Alliance, an organization of fishermen, seafood processors, vessel owners and fishing communities that include most involved in the groundfish and crab fisheries in the Bering Sea and Gulf of Alaska, MCAF members knew the problem first hand. In 2003 they vowed to do something about it.



**MCA**  
FOUNDATION

## The Program

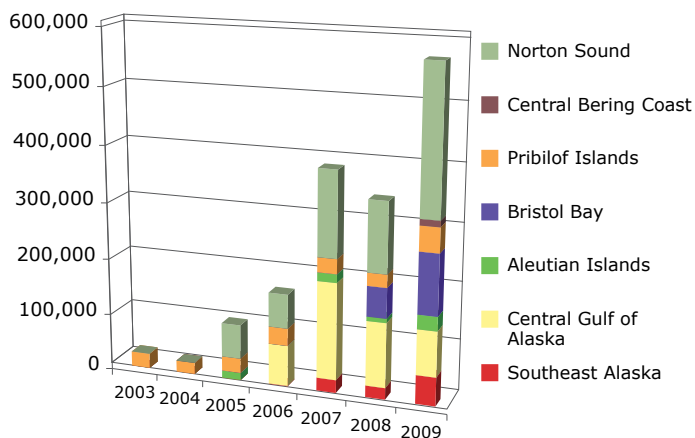
It was clear that tackling a problem as broad as marine debris on Alaska's extensive and remote coastline would require a programmatic response. In 2003, MCAF's parent organization, the Marine Conservation Alliance, used seed money from the seafood industry to expand cleanup efforts on the Pribilof Island of St. Paul, a high priority due to the risk of fur seal entanglements. Taking the next step, they formed the non-profit foundation to bring public and private funding to bear to address the task statewide. Buoyed by a NOAA grant, MCAF set its sights higher.



The plan was to work with existing groups; fund, expand and coordinate ongoing efforts and address unmet needs. In the Pribilofs, we helped the Saint Paul Tribal Government Ecosystem Conservation Office (ECO) boost their ongoing efforts and cleaned out a 157,000 pound stockpile of previously accumulated debris. We then worked with the tribal group on neighboring St. George Island to initiate cleanup work and study the rate of debris accumulations. From that start, MCAF incorporated its lessons learned into a Marine Debris Handbook with standardized protocols that could easily be applied elsewhere. What emerged was a program to survey, prioritize, cleanup, sample, dispose, recycle and monitor debris accumulations.



MCAF Marine Debris Program  
Pounds of Debris Removed



## New Partners, Broader Focus

MCAF's marine debris program began by partnering with the Aleut Community of St Paul on the Pribilof Islands in 2003 and 2004. Through 2009, the number of partners has grown to nine tribal governments, ten non profits and multiple other organizations (including fishermen, salvors, and other private contractors). MCAF has expanded statewide with a total of 52 cleanups, 23 of which took place in 2009 alone. The debris collected each year has increased steadily beginning with 26,000 pounds in 2003 and continuing to 570,877 pounds in 2009. In all, the MCAF has removed over 1,600,000 pounds of debris from the Alaska shoreline.

## Planning for Safety

Cleaning marine debris is no walk on the beach. It involves transportation to remote areas, the uncertainties of Alaska weather, slick rocks, unstable logjams and wildlife encounters. The MCAF program requires an approved safety plan with daily safety briefings, standardized protocols and liability insurance. To date, no one has been injured during the course of an MCAF sponsored cleanup program and we intend to keep it that way.



## Assessing the Damage

In addition to the cleanups, MCAF encourages assessments of all areas of Alaska to help determine project priorities and streamline cleanup efforts. To date, MCAF has sponsored over 2,500 miles of aerial surveys; 500 miles in the Arctic, 1,500 miles of the Western Alaska shoreline including Bristol Bay and 600 miles of Kodiak Island. Survey results are posted on the MCAF website in the Marine Debris Database. In addition, MCAF encourages public reporting of debris accumulations to enrich the Database, such as the results of a group of recreational kayakers vacationing and surveying during a three week trip in the Aleutians.

## Alternative Energies

In rural Alaska, landfills are nearly as great of a problem as marine debris. Many of the villages simply cannot handle additional deposits to their landfills, so MCAF has sought out alternatives for disposal of plastics, nets, lines, and other recyclables. Debris from some projects has been successfully shipped and processed at a Seattle area recycler and other alternatives such as conversion of plastic to fuel have been tested. The largest obstacle to increased recycling remains the high cost of shipping from rural areas.

## Broadening the Base

The MCAF's work has attracted media interest and a growing number of supporters. Among our partners are NOAA, the Alaska Coastal Management Program, the Alaskan Brewing Company's Coastal CODE Fund, and Pacific Stevedoring, which funded cleanup work in the Aleutians as mitigation for a new dock in Dutch Harbor. Potential partners in the visitor industry and elsewhere have expressed interest in supporting the MCA Foundation's work, making federal dollars stretch even further.

## Why we do it

The MCA Foundation took on this challenge because we know marine debris isn't just an eyesore, it's a threat to fish, seabirds and marine mammals. Nets, line and strapping bands can entangle seals and whales. Floating "ghost nets" kill fish and other marine mammals. Seabirds mistake brightly colored debris to be food and block their digestive tracts with plastics. Marine debris can even foul propellers and clog engine cooling systems, making it a hazard to navigation.

## International Problem

While nationally most marine debris comes from land based sources, much of the trash on Alaska beaches comes from far away. Currents collect debris off the coast of Asia and hand it off to gyres in the Gulf of Alaska. The proof is on plastic bottles found along the Alaska coast. Many bear labels in Japanese, Korean, Chinese and Russian. One was even in Arabic. Samples of fishing nets collected indicate most are types of nets used by foreign fleets and are carried to Alaska by currents or remnants from the days when foreign fishing fleets ruled Alaska waters.



## Home Grown Solution

The long term answer is stopping marine debris before it gets into the environment and MCAF is working to train fishermen and schoolchildren about the problem. We've partnered marine safety educators to incorporate debris education into their curriculum and have created a classroom course targeting middle and high school students with a message on marine stewardship and sustainability.

## Hard Work Brings Progress

Marine Debris is a huge problem, worldwide in scope and since plastics don't biodegrade, is one that threatens never to go away. But progress is being made. Alaska communities that have long sponsored cleanup programs report a change in the composition and amount of debris they see. With public attention being focused on the sources of debris, people are recycling plastics more. With growing emphasis on sustainable fisheries, more fishermen are stowing their plastics at sea. With hard work and a commitment to change, MCAF is helping foster a sea change on attitudes about marine debris in Alaska.

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